

Central American Actor Workshop: A Catalyst of Change

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Learn Your Craft

Professional theatre in Central America may not exist.

That observation will be incendiary in Costa Rica as well our neighboring countries, all of which maintain active theatre communities composed of people who consider theatre their profession. How then can we make that claim? And more importantly, why?

We live and work in a region where some theatre practitioners still have difficulty finding material as basic to our profession as, for example, Antonin Artaud's *Theatre and its Double*. Years ago we were taught, 'learn your craft before you practice your profession.' Yet what can it mean to 'learn your craft' when access to the material essential to teaching us that craft is difficult, and sometimes impossible, to get?

Now for the actor, this 'material' is not only the body of written work essential for both a theoretical and historical understanding of theatre and theatre practice. What is indispensable for the development of the actor's craft is access to the people capable of leading the way in training, development and formation. And again, just as with *Theatre and Its Double*, we live in a region where access to these people is at best limited and at worst unavailable.

In terms of professional actor formation in Central America, what emerges is a variety of possibilities all unfortunately linked by a limited exposure to professionals of the highest calibre. Teatro Abya Yala, an independent theatre company based in San José, Costa Rica recently organized an intensive Actor Training Workshop for Central American actors and actresses in order to address this very problem of access to the artists and teachers who can begin to shake us out our sleep of satisfied mediocrity.

Formation

On the end of the spectrum we have the option of autodidacticism. Although too often romanticized, lack of formal, academic theatre education is no impediment in the professional formation of the actor, as the extraordinary example of the actors of the Odin Teatret of Denmark attest to. Yet unlike the the Odin--they formed around an intense commitment to training just after Eugenio Barba had spent three years with Grotowski and therefore brought clear working principles from which to depart--the autodidacticism of the Central American performer is too often divorced from any actor training vocabulary. Usually able musically, often comedic in nature, these performers hone their skills through performance trial and error: a kind of 'if I build it funny, they will come' aesthetic. Any comedian or street performer will tell you there's great wisdom in this; yet the performance muscles developed on the steets can also lead to a kind of deformative

atrophy for the actor who wishes to pursue other forms of expression. With no clear references to draw on in terms of training and development that can deepen and broaden the actors approach to his craft, the autodidacticism we encounter in Central America--isolated both professionally and academically--is a weakness rather than a weapon.

On the other end of the spectrum, we have the university degree-granting programs, best exemplified by Costa Rica's University of Costa Rica and National University, both of which offer Bachelors degree and the advanced Licenciatura degree in Theatre Arts. The four/five year programs focus on Acting as the centerpiece and offer a core curriculum of acting, voice and speech, movement and and additional support courses in direction, design, history and theory. In addition, both programs offer the opportunity to participate and/or perform in University productions, in either student productions or more 'mainstage' type. Recognizable in structure and design, these two University programs are clearly the most viable alternative in terms of academic formation within the Central American context and do provide a preliminary base of theatre study.

Yet again, as we delve beneath the surface of this option, we find deficiencies not dissimilar to those of the autodidact: problems of the working vocabulary of the formation, limited access to the current practitioners needed to expand that very vocabulary, and the absence of the opportunity to continue past an introductory level.

Just as neither program has moved substantively past the principal tenets of a watered-down Stanislavskian realism, both programs have been notably passive about bringing new people--either for workshops, visiting residencies, or faculty exchanges--that can offer a variety of methodologies, working alternatives past and present to psychological realism. In addition, neither in Costa Rica nor in any Central American country is there a graduate program in theatre training that can offer the continuing formation needed to deepen and sharpen the skills provided on the undergraduate level. Without access to ongoing development within an institutional framework, students who pass through these undergraduate programs affix themselves to working processes, introductory at best and obsolete at worst. And so, for all its insitutional largesse (relative to the Central American context, these programs possess a substantial base of personnel and resources), the academic option too often takes students from flawed formation to too-speedy 'professional' participation on the national stage, a conveyor belt churning out actors far removed from the active, contemporary dialogue on theatre and stagecraft.

The third rail on this track of professional formation in Central America is the now-called Third Theatre: group theatres--the collective of practitioners who dedicate themselves to the ongoing task of actor training as well as the creation of performances, usually forged during a long creative process. It was once the polar opposite of the mainstream paradigm of pick-up-team theatre, in that the longer the people stayed together as a creative unit, the deeper and more efficient the work becomes. It is the professional paradigm forged in the modern age by Grotowski who seeded the world with this vision, and maintained by the few theatre groups who have stayed together now for up to forty years. It is the ethic of the formation of a common working vocabulary and the nurturing of the actor's craft

through training. And it is often the professional paradigm that generates the most dynamic, provocative work in theatre.

It was precisely for these people that Teatro Abya Yala, with the support of the Dutch non-governmental organization HIVOS, designed and organized the Acting Training Workshop, 'Learning to Learn.' Inviting two actors per Central American country with costs completely covered, we wanted to stimulate and nurture the groups who have demonstrated a commitment to actor training-- that daily work on oneself independent from the making of performance, the work that Grotowski likened to teeth-brushing: necessary but decidedly unspectacular. The three master teachers invited--actor Tage Larsen, member of the Odin Teatret of Denmark; the voice specialist Richard Armstrong, founding member of the Roy Hart Theatre and currently on the faculty of the Experimental Theatre Wing of New York University; and Luis de Tavira, one of Mexico's leading teachers and directors--would broaden the training and working vocabularies so that participating members of these 'group theatres' could return and introduce a broader vision, coupled with concrete working tools into the training space.

The problem that we encountered as we began to identify potential participants for the workshop was that our ideal candidates did not exist. There simply is not more than two or three theatre groups in Central America who have committed themselves to actor training and who have stayed together for more than the meagre group theatre average. As is the case the world over, groups in Central America sprout like mushrooms, too often lack the continuity to stay the course and develop a professional identity through ongoing commitment to craft, and ultimately wither and dissolve.

Once we had recognized that these target participants--members of group theatres dedicated to actor training--did not exist in sufficient number, we had to adjust whom we believed the workshop could benefit and how the encounter could have repercussions beyond the three weeks of participation. As it became clear that we would have to open participation to include the broader context--that is, the individual autodidacts and those in or from the academic environment--the problem then became one of multiplication, one of the driving principles of the project. Once the paradigm of the actor within a group dedicated to actor training slips away as the context of multiplication, the workshop then became how to stimulate students and professionals who may have little understanding of what actor training is. That is, we would have to compel the participants to not only share the working principles of their encounter but more importantly try to be the ambassadors of an idea--the very idea of actor training.

The Workshops

Tage Larsen

Concrete Action

Tage Larsen's workshop was divided into physical and vocal training exercises and the composition of a score of physical actions, which would later be linked with a spoken text. The principle driving this line of actor training is to forge the actor's commitment to the concrete in order to acquire an awareness of how our body/mind must be wholly engaged when in action. The training included, among other forms: the Wind Dance, a training form developed by Odin colleague Iben Nagel Rasmussen that incorporates

physical action within a specific rhythmic structure; poles, a line of work Tage learned from the Chinese Opera, in which we manipulate a large, 2 meter pole in a variety of fluid patterns; and a series of exercises based on the give and take of the weight of the participants. This training teaches us to bring our entire self to bear on what we do as actors in a place of real work--concrete work with weight and balance, with an object, with a rhythm-- so that when we are asked to perform an action within the context of a fiction, we make it concrete, make it real.

The work on physical score is the other branch of Tage's workshop. Developing first a sensitivity to the principles of composition of physical action--the use of the spinal column, balance, opposition--the participants must extract fragments from a series of exercises and link them together in a specific order, creating a repeatable score of physical actions. This score is then yoked to a previously learned text. The result, which can be used as a monologue or in dialogue, creates what Tage's calls a kind of "spontaneous drama" as the often conflicting material of the body and the voice speak to each other in ways that would be impossible to develop logically or rationally. The coincidental joining of two previously unrelated bodies of material--one physical and one vocal--creates moments of accidental drama that are both stimulating for the actor and often remarkable from the spectators point of view. For many, it was the first time they had experienced a process of developing physical material that was not directed related to or rationally drawn from a reading of the text. Rather the acted moment becomes a dynamic confluence, a coincidental yoking of the physical and the vocal. This line of work introduced many participants to a way of working that may help them challenge and transcend the often emotionally banal and physically static psychological illustration of a written dramatic text.

Richard Armstrong

The Voice is the Muscle of the Soul

While Tage Larsen's work brought us in contact with the concrete, Richard Armstrong's session brings us to the untouchable heart of sound. "Sound is the manifestation of the internal condition", he tells us at the outset and, as many know, a work session with Richard Armstrong becomes an encounter not with the voice but rather with the self through sound.

Less a technique and more an approach that has developed over a lifetime of work, Richard creates a working environment of remarkable trust and protection, so that in no moment does anyone feel either judged or even critically observed; and as he proceeds to break down the myriad of dams that block the actor from expressing his/her inner wealth, the participants grow willing and able to break through to the sound of the world within.

If "sound is a story", as Richard says, the nature of the sound, of the story, is directly related to the nature of the breath--'the pre-story' in Richard's imagery--that produces the sound; and much of his approach is designed to foster the organic connection between breath and sound. He begins with exercises designed to relax, open and deepen the breath we take in: a carefully designed way to roll on the floor while maintaining the breathing relaxed and long; an exercise in pairs in which breath and early, deep sound is physically

protected and supported by a partner. He then begins to expand the relationship between breath and sound, best exemplified by an exercise that illuminates the dual meaning of the word 'inspiration'-- the physical inspiration needed for the breathing cycle as well as the creative inspiration needed for the sound to emerge. We commit to a specific 'point of inspiration', first a point on the floor and later a place on someone else's body. Only at this point do we inhale, do we generate the 'pre-story' in breath, and only elsewhere, moving about the room do we transform the breath, the inspiration, into sound, into brief vocal stories that last the life of the air that it rides on.

Richard then expands the range of vocal expression in a series of exercises that challenge our relationship to tone and pitch. Through a series of playful images--an elf, an English duchess, an opera diva, and a heavy, stupid, happy monster--he helps articulate in our bodies the resonators that generate specific vocal tones: nasal, facial, pectoral and abdominal. He then opens up the possible range of each sound so that we begin to feel that, for example, the deep sound of the stupid monster can move up the scale in pitch or that nasally elf can go down into the lower register. The culminating experience of Richard Armstrong's workshop is an exercise in which he accompanies on piano each participant--now more rooted to the relationship between breath and sound as well as in command of a newfound range of vocal possibility--through an exploration of the musical scale. As the participants grow more confident of their abilities to reflect in sound their internal experience, they break through to hidden vocal territories and astonish themselves and each other with the richness, range, clarity, and depth of the vocal journeys that Richard brings them on.

Luis de Tavira

A Mental Operation

'Acting is a mental operation' is the premise that drives the work of Luis de Tavira, and a working session with him is as mentally provocative as it is physically exhausting. The actor's work, according to de Tavira, is primarily to make that which is fiction real, and this, he asserts, is a mental exercise. In order to develop this alchemical ability, the practical training sessions of Luis de Tavira focus first on developing an intense commitment to the here and now, in order to sharpen the ability to be wholly reactive to *real* stimuli, so as to finally bring the entirety of that heightened physical and mental presence to bear on fluid, dynamic reactions in world of *fictional* stimuli. Whereas with Tague, we were confronted with the real through the commitment to the concrete physical action, with Luis de Tavira it is the mind of the actor that governs the intensity of this commitment and it is therefore the mind of the actor, and its ability to be wholly present and reactive, that is the essential work of the actor.

Walking. Walking is the bedrock of the practical session of Luis de Tavira. A believer in the peripatetic school of thought, de Tavira asserts that as long as the body is in motion, the mind will accompany it. What Stanislavski identified as organicity--*perezhevanie*, the mind giving orders to the body--de Tavira takes to its logical conclusion through walking. First simply--I walk and think that I walk--and later more complicated through swift changes of directions, orientation, quality, the walking ultimately crosses the threshold into the fictive --an imaginary point before you, a boat rocking us all--as de Tavira brings

the actors to the frontiers of the relationship between their mind and their body, between the fictive and the real.

In addition to this line of work, de Tavira proposed two other lines of work: one he identifies as the Discourse on Passion; and the other a reflection on the Poetics of the Actor. In the Discourse on Passion, de Tavira first delves into the nature of Passionate Love--that inextinguishable need for the other--, an inquiry that the actors must put into practice in structured, realistic improvisations designed to sharpen the relationship between thought and action, between preparation and representation. The improvisations become the springboard for an acute critical analysis by de Tavira of the work, a session that forces many participants to confront the weaknesses in their thinking and deficiencies in their approaches to stage practice.

The Poetic of the Actor is de Tavira's attempt to communicate a profoundly original interpretation of foundational principles of Western dramatic art. By reexamining original linguistic contexts, he unyokes the Aristotelian concepts of *mimesis* and *verosimilitude*, from their incorrect definitions as *imitation* and *accuracy of depiction*, respectively; instead he proposes *re-presentation* as a clearer understanding of *mimesis* and *a truth the object itself doesn't contain* for *verosimilitude*. Critical concepts that have had an enormous influence on the nature of theatre practice in the West are now liberated from the banality of realistic, 'credible' depiction of human character.

By the end of the week the three branches of de Tavira's work intertwine, feed each other, create an integrated whole of reflection, action, passion, fiction, reaction. Above all, in order to recreate, *to re-present the essential truths of human character*, we must train our minds as well as our physical and vocal instrument, that thought and action are inseparable in the body, mind and spirit of the actor, the poet of the fictional here and now.

The three approaches to actor training were as varied as the professional backgrounds of the master-teachers themselves and the three workshops back to back to back created an unexpected dramaturgy to the whole session. From the body of Tague's work to the heart of Richard to the mind of de Tavira, we were placed in direct contact with the deepest of methodologies, reflecting not only the richness of each approach but also the profound significance that each approach, and their connections, can have on the work of the actor.

Crisis and Return

The idea of culture, in the literal sense of the word, is that which catalyzes change. At the heart of the endeavor of the workshop was the drive to stimulate a small group of people so that upon return, they resist the temptation to fold back into the mediocrity of their own work. What we wanted to create was in fact a culture, a brief and potent catalyst for change. The great difficulty will be for each one of the participants to then become a catalyst of change upon return. But in order for that to happen, we must recognize a certain bravery is necessary: the bravery to admit that my work is mediocre, my community is not professional, and that I refuse to fold back.

We realized very early on that one of the principal goals of the workshop--the ripple effect of professionalization--was not exactly a fallacy but almost a practical impossibility. The work itself is profoundly unrepeatable, a fact that generated considerable discussion among the participants. The ability to reproduce working material of this nature is inversely proportional to the mastery of he or she who originally transmits the material itself. Tage Larsen, Richard Armstrong and Luis de Tavira have so incorporated, through their lifetime of experience, an approach to actor training and formation that much of what they do is simply irreproducible. As it should be, no? A great encounter with a theatre artist is not a series of exercises but rather an encounter with a vision of theatre, inseparable from the master teacher himself.

Yet, as Richard Armstrong points out, it is not the exercise, it's the experience. It was clear during each individual workshop, as well as the accumulated encounter of the three weeks, that the experience was profound and meaningful for the participants. What Tage Larsen, Richard Armstrong and Luis de Tavira communicated is that the horizon of possibility for the actor is so much broader, brighter and richer than we imagined. Limited access and exposure to first-rate theatre artists often deludes us into believing that what we are capable of doing is what encompasses the world of our art. Exposure to this level of theatre training and formation, above all, lifts this level of expectation of what an theatre actor is capable of. But lifting the veil of ignorance is not without consequences and, above all, what this workshop generated for the fourteen Central American actors and actresses who participated was a profound and hopefully transformative crisis; specifically, the two-pronged crisis of how to continue to nurture on oneself the work begun here and how to communicate to colleagues the useful and usable practical working tools that had been acquired.

The Chinese character for *crisis* is composed of the combination of two ideas: peril and opportunity. The peril of the workshop is that of the ostrich, that the actors will experience a sense of intense personal inability before an encounter of such profound skill and artistry that they will return and bury their heads deeper in the soil of their own mediocrity. This will happen with the participants who are unable to admit that where they are as actors, and perhaps where their community is as well, is really at the level of a beginner or amateur. However, curiously, this crisis will be fleeting, as denial paves the way for soothing calm of delusion and delusion to stasis. No turbulence, no change, no problem.

The profound crisis of the workshop will be felt not by the ostriches but by those who return and try to transform the workshop into ongoing change, both in themselves and in their communities. For it is they who will encounter the peril and the opportunity transformation. How do I try to give back to fellow theatre workers something of this experience? What is communicable? What practical tools can I develop and transmit? How do I maintain the commitment to the daily, unrelenting task of improvement. How do I nourish the turbulence experienced and provoke it in others? How do I become a catalyst of change, a culture of one? And many are beginning to answer these questions, or at least maintaining the question alive.

We are before the dilemma of a great journey. The impact, the real value of journey is not so much where I went but rather who I became while there, not the location but the transformation. Yet for the most part this is incommunicable upon return (and there is always return); so what we are so often left with, must settle for, are able to communicate is: this is me by the Eifel Tower, on the Great Wall, in Rio. Who I was, if experienced at all, I cannot say but here are some lovely pictures of where I went.

The same will be true of this workshop. For the handful of actors touched by the three weeks of the work, what to do, to say, becomes the key. They may at first feel only capable of communicating (as with the photos of the journey): this is the exercise of the sticks, this is a breathing technique we learned. This will be necessary and valid and in fact the early concrete way for them to return and share. Yet the real work that lies ahead for those who experienced the sky opening up is to try to continue the work: alone, in the classroom, and in their groups: create and protect spaces where this work and what emerges from it can be properly nurtured. Try not to reproduce the experience nor only imitate the exercises, but begin the long road of inquiry, the work on oneself and on the conditions that created the brief, profound sense of transformation. Work on that day after day after day. The goal, as always, is to bring the journey back home.

And likewise we return to our point of departure: 'professional theatre may not exist in Central America.'

Yet.

It is in that one word wherein the future lies.

**Intensive Actor Training Workshop
'Learning to Learn'
June 19-July 10, 2003**

Participants

Guatemala

- Gustavo Santos
- Jorge Hernández Viemann
- Luis Otoniel Morales

Honduras

- Damario Reyes

El Salvador

- César Pineda
- Egly Larreynaga
- Jenniffer Q. Valiente

Nicaragua

- Alicia Irene Pilarte

Costa Rica

- Janko Navarro
- Marco Guillén
- Natalia Chacón

Panamá

- Mariela Aragón Chiari
- Roberto Quintero
- Teresita Mans

Master Teachers

Tage Larsen was born in 1949 in Randers, Denmark. He started at the Odin Teatret in 1971 as a "helping hand" and soon was accepted as an actor. He remained with Odin Teatret until 1987 when he started his own group, Yorick Teatret. Tage also taught at the Nordisk Teater Skole in Århus. In 1997, he once again returned to the Odin Teatret.

He has been an actor in many of the memorable performances of the Odin, receiving his theater training and studies within the group and participating in most of the world tournees. He has given workshops in Europe, Latin America and Africa.

Richard Armstrong's distinction as a teacher, director and performer is recognized throughout the world. As a pioneer of the extension of the human voice, his unique abilities have taken him to over 20 countries, and inspired a whole generation of performers and their work.

A founding member of the Roy Hart Theatre of France, he divides his time between Paris, where he was founding faculty member of New York University's Experimental Theatre Wing, Banff, Canada, where he is on faculty as extended

vocal specialist in the Twentieth Century Opera and Song Program at the Banff Centre for the Arts and New York, where he teaches for Fordham College and New York University.

Luis de Tavira was born in Mexico City in 1948. He studied Classical Literature and Philosophy and specialized in Dramatic Art. He has directed more than forty plays all over Mexico and has participated in important festivals around the world. He has taught at the principle training centers of Mexico as well as given workshops in universities in Europe, Latin America, the United States and throughout Mexico.

He has given talks at international symposiums such as Encounter on Art for the People of the United Nations and UNESCO, the International Encounter of Theatre Directors, among other events. He has been director of Theatre Activities and of the University Theatre Center of the UNAM, director of the Center of Theatre Experimentation of the INBA, as well as other institutional positions

He has published books of poetry, drama and essays in national and international journals. His plays have received jury awards from the Festival des Ameriques de Montreal, the Latin American Prize of Theatre Creation and Investigation CELCIT, of Caracas, Venezuela, the Theatre Writers Group and the «Juan Ruiz de Alarcón» Prize, among many others. He is a member of the National System of Creators of Art of the FONCA.

Organizers

Teatro Abya Yala, directed since its founding in 1991 by Roxana Avila and David Korish, is an independent theatre company based in Costa Rica and dedicated to creating original theatre work. In addition to making performances and maintaining a commitment to actor training and theatre investigation, Abya Yala has been active in the field of production and promotion of artistic and cultural activities in the sector of independent art in Costa Rican and Central American arts.

Assisants

Denise Duncan

Gina Monge

Roxana Avila

Director, actress, designer and university theater professor. She has a Master's Degree with emphasis in theater directing from Carnegie Mellon University, has directed professionally in New York, London, Edinburgh and Costa Rica, participated in international conferences, workshops and seminars since 1994 and taught or given workshops in Baltimore and Central America. She has earned scholarships to study diverse theater forms from the governments of Japan, Germany, Spain and the United States.

David Korish

North American director residing in Costa Rica since 1991 after receiving a Fulbright Scholarship for Professional Exchange. He has directed in Minneapolis, New York, London and Scotland. He worked with Eugenio Barba, the Odin Teatret and the ISTA (International School of Theater Anthropology) during 1996 and 1997 and is currently Acting Professor at the School of Scenic Arts of the National University of Costa Rica.

Together, Roxana Avila and David Korish have created original works and theater pieces such *Our Waiting Hour*, *Sade*, *The Ecstasy*, *Romeo and Julieta in Concert*, *The Othello Case*, among others; they organized a Central American tour of Teatro Abya Yala in the year 2000 and have given professional workshops in Europe and the United States.

Project Assistants

Denise Duncan

Gina Monge

Gina Monge has degrees in Public Relations and Dramatic Arts from the University of Costa Rica and is currently a student in the Master's of Linguistic program.

Denise Duncan has a degree in Journalism and is currently a fourth year student in the Dramatic Arts School of the University of Costa Rica.

Both, Denise and Gina have worked professionally in communication and participated in several theatrical performances in San José.

Hivos (Financing Organization)

Hivos (Humanistic Institute for Development Cooperation) is a Dutch non-governmental organisation which operates on the basis of humanist values. Hivos aims to contribute towards a free, just and sustainable world. The organisation is committed to the poor and marginalised - and to the organisations which promote their interests - in countries in the South and in South-East Europe.