

Central America Tour: 2000 *The Journey of a Lifetime*

From January through March, 2000, Teatro Abya Yala -- an independent theatre company based in San José, Costa Rica -- toured the cities and smaller communities of Central America with a menu of activities that included adult and children's theatre, an outdoor performance for plazas and town squares, a *pasacalles* or street parade, workshops for professionals and non-professionals, both adults and children, and a multimedia conference on an Indian classical dance form called Odissi. For near to three months, seven people covered 7500 kilometers from Costa Rica to Panama to Nicaragua to El Salvador to Guatemala to Honduras and back to Costa Rica hauling a bag of tricks the size of a small truck and all but living in mini-bus named Grace.

For those who have toured extensively, a three month bus-and-truck tour of over 7500 kilometers (approximately 4000 miles) may not seem like much, but Central America is a region whose 'cultural corridors' -- the infrastructure by which individuals and groups can freely move and share each others work -- are still for the most part unpaved. So a tour of such scale encounters enormous hurdles both from a planning point of view as well as in its realization. The basic logistics of the tour -- moving a truck loaded with sound and lighting equipment, props, costumes and scenery in tandem with a mini-bus carrying seven people through five countries, organizing food and housing at every stop, and offering one program of activities for the cities and another for the communities - was a staggering endeavor of coordination and preparation that involved over 50 people throughout Central America and took up to two years to organize. To our knowledge, a project of such breadth and magnitude, of such willful insanity it seemed at times, had never been attempted in this region.

An adventure of this sort is really a balance between the movement forward in time and place and the scattered sprouts of thought, the random reactions that fill each day. The following is an attempt to communicate some essential moments during the tour with an occasional sprout from a journal I kept throughout the journey.

Portobelo

Second story paradise looking out over Portobelo Bay. A miracle is before us, in time and space. An icebreaking pasacalles and all the preparation, repeat 100 times, now pays off 100 fold. The base of operations, a restored customs-house and from there, we move in concentric circles of an amazing and instantaneous connection between Abya Yala and Portobelo...as we look forward to an incredible week hard fought and well-deserved...treated like royalty and spoiled for life....1/11/00

The town of Portobelo along the Caribbean coast of Panama was the first of what were to be three 'artistic residencies' -- weeklong stays in small communities during which we hoped to establish deeper, more profound links with the people of the town than is possible by just passing through and giving performances. One guiding principle of the artistic residencies was that of cultural exchange or barter: we offer our performances and workshops, our culture as a theatre group, in exchange for what the host community can offer -- its own songs, dances, stories.

A colonial port town on the edge of a perfect half-moon bay, Portobelo has a largely Afro-Caribbean population, much of which has maintained strong ties to a tradition called 'Congo'.

Because Portobelo was an essential stronghold along the gold route from Peru to Spain, it became an important stop for the slave trade as well. Congo in this region of Panama developed when a group of black slaves escaped to the mountains and established an independent community, keeping alive songs, dances, and a rich mythology of warriors, devils, saints, even clowns from their African heritage. Our host in Portobelo was Sandra Eleta, a photographer and visual artist who has created the Portobelo Workshop, a small artists studio which fosters work that emerges from the mythology of Congo. Through the centuries, as the African population mixed with the ladino, the festivities of Congo weaved with the Christian calendar until today the period of celebration lasts from the beginning of January, with a ceremony called the Raising of the Flag, until Holy Week in April when the devils of Congo are chased out of town by Christian saints.

Arriving in Portobelo, the anticipation of finally beginning our tour was heightened by an anxiety over whether anyone would be interested in what we had to offer. A watershed moment for all of us occurred when our first *pasacalles* erupted onto the streets of Portobelo: two actors on stilts in bright costumes, one banging a drum, the other wearing a large animal mask; a third dressed in a clown red jumpsuit and silver wig riding a fire engine red three-wheeler which the children can jump on and take a ride; and another in a white sufi costume with a multicolored face mask twirling an enormous colorful rope. We explode into town and in minutes create a parade of laughing and screaming children and a townful of fascinated spectators. At that very moment in Portobelo, we understood that our entry into the hearts of these small towns we would touch throughout Central America would be the children and that our entry into the hearts of the children was the *pasacalles*. Yelling and dancing and playing with us, children can enter into play with a group of strangers, a group of clowns, openly and immediately in a way adults cannot. And so at that very moment of awe and delight, for us as much as for the children who would follow us and shower us with adoration for the ten days to come, at that very moment the tour, after two years of calls, of faxes, of emails and letters, of rehearsals, of meetings and training, at that very moment the tour had begun.

Our base of operations in Portobelo was the recently restored customs-house, a marvelous colonial building in the center of town, originally used for the buying and selling of slaves. Now overly protected by its keepers and grossly underused by the community, we were pleased that we filled the second story of that building with life and activity: our children's performance, our workshops in acrobatics, juggling and stilts, our open rehearsals and our night of cultural exchange, which we simply called a talent show and where, in return for a brief juggling routine and a short group movement exercise of ours, we were introduced to congo dancing for the first time.

Congo is an African dance of courtship in which, to the accompaniment of drums, the men make various approaches at the women, whose goal is to avoid and evade contact. Both the men and the women move in and out of a central circle of dance so that there is a constant flow of pairs. During this first cultural exchange, the actors of Abya Yala learned the basic steps and structure of congo dancing, to the delight of both the participants and observers from the town. Yet it was the following evening, towards the end of our visit, at the celebration of the Raising of the Flag, where we saw and participated in a night of Congo in its full splendor.

The Raising of the Flag is a ceremony performed in a straw thatched hut, in which, after raising the inaugural flag of the Congo, ensues a night of drumming (by men), singing (by women), dancing (by both) and drinking (by all). Congo is curiously both the name of the tradition and the name of one of the principal characters in that tradition, whose role during the Raising of the

Flag is central. The character of the Congo is a kind of bagman/clown/king -- dressed up in cast-off clothes, donning a makeshift crown, carrying a bag of goodies (comic items that might range from an old phone to a plastic alligator to a wrinkled porno magazine) -- who speaks in an invented language inverting word gender (for example, *agua* becomes *agua*; *sombrero* becomes *sombrera*) and who is the ruler of the circle of dance. Prior to the celebration, two of the principal Congos in the community, Yaneka and Pajarito, in the state of incipient inebriation essential to the three day celebration of the Raising of the Flag, transformed the four male members of Abya Yala into Congo: blackening their faces, crowning their heads and baptizing them with nicknames for the night. In that way, Teatro Abya Yala, led by these four recently blackened clown/kings (one who was even on stilts) arrived at the Raising of the Flag to the wonder of the town and participated in the night of singing and dancing, thus beginning the time of the Congo and marking the end of the brief courtship between Teatro Abya Yala and the community of Portobelo.

Yesterday we suspended the opening of A Soldier's Tale. All set up, we cowered ignominiously before the dropping of water, slaves to our electrical technology. We must swallow this bitter pill and find our way to never again walk away from the field of play...1/17/00

We push it over the top after all. Opened A Soldier's Tale on the proper night after all, for only the people of Portobelo. No outside spectators; it was for the community that had opened up their hearts to us, and we gave them our performance in return. We ended not with applause but in a circle of thanks between the community and the theatre group...1/19/00

Panama City

The displacement we experienced upon moving from Portobelo to Panama City was exacerbated by the bizarre nature of our living conditions, one of the most curious housing arrangements we would experience during the tour. As the Panama Canal was turned over to the Panamanians at the end of 1999, the U.S. forts that border the Canal were emptied of their former occupants and, like the prime real estate that they are, put up for sale to the highest bidder. So there, behind the still heavily manned gates of the now barren Fort Clayton, were we, amid the desolate Main Streets and well-groomed lawns, amid riderless swing sets and readerless libraries and studentless schools, amid the now gringoless stage-set home that was created to trick the homesick, there we stayed on the top floor of a two family house. Coming from Sandra Eleta's bustling house overlooking the perfect Portobelo bay, still warm from that brief embrace of community, we found ourselves cast into the cold, artificial perfection of abandoned Anywhere, USA.

The movement from Portobelo where we became such an integral part of the community to Panama where we present performances resparks the fundamental questions of: for whom do we do theatre? for what reasons?...1/23/00

Panama City was the first of four urban stops we would make. Except for Tegucigalpa, where we presented only our children's play *El Mundo de Max* (Max's World), our program for Panama City, San Salvador, and Guatemala City was composed of primarily four activities: the performance of our most recent work, *Sade*, a conference/workshop drawing on the principles of Theatre Anthropology, a multimedia conference on Odissi dance, and our children's play. In Panama, we encountered for the first time what would be the abrupt shift in work rhythm as we moved from the community to the city. In the former, because of the amount of time we gave to the visit as well as the nature of the residency, we could enter into a relaxed work rhythm more conducive to sharing with the community. In the cities we shifted gears to a speed often frenetic and exhausting, as it was in Panama where we gave, between *Sade*, *El Mundo de Max* and *The Soldier's Tale*, seven performances over the course of three days.

Time will tell what light will bring...1/21/00

What we encountered in adapting the lighting possibilities of the Teatro Anita Villalaz, where we presented *Sade* in Panama, to our lighting requirements was something we had anticipated in a tour of Central America; that is, the technical conditions of the theatres in which we were to present *Sade* may be insufficient for the production. Lacking professional lighting instruments and a working dimmer board, the technical crew of the Anita Villalaz struggled to convert an antiquated lighting infrastructure into the most basic workable system, at least for the production. After struggling over the complexities of 220, 110, wattage, cables, dimmers, and breakers, the frustration of losing an entire day was set in relief that same night as we were treated to a full eclipse of the moon, a smooth and effortless display of lighting virtuosity that we enjoyed from the lawns of our private suburban village.

Sade takes the life and work of the Marquis de Sade as a point of departure to inquire into subjective nature of decency -- sexual, political, social, as well as explore the limits of the human imagination. Blatantly sexual, both verbally and visually, aggressively anti-religious, *Sade* combines texts of Yukio Mishima's *Madame de Sade* with texts both by and about de Sade, letters between de Sade and his wife as well as material from Eduardo Galeano and even the Bible. Despite, or perhaps due to, the nature of the material and the complex performance

aesthetic -- simultaneity of dramatic action is one of its principal devices -- *Sade* elicited some very strong responses in Costa Rica, particularly from young audiences, and we were curious to see how it would be received in the conservative climate of Panama City. What was exciting about our performances in Panama was that, after not having performed for some time, it reappeared with real teeth. The actors performed on the verge of remembering, at that vital border between what is prepared and what is unknown. The response to the piece was largely positive, although the Costa Rican Ambassador feared for his job by bringing us to Panama and we did receive a violent condemnation of our work, not only of *Sade* but the entire body of our performances, from one member of the Panamanian theatrical community, as would learn two and half months later upon our return to Costa Rica.

We wind down the first leg of the tour, loved in Portobelo and well-received in Panama, but each day ends with an exhaustion that begs the question: how will we sustain this for months?...1/23/00

Each day, each place, the result of hours of work...Presence and activity and impact, we make a difference where we go and leave behind some kind of wake. We are still just beginning and so must pace ourselves, emotionally and physically, day by different day by different day....1/31/00

Jumping. Jumping forward, past our unauthorized 4 a.m. escape from Fort Clayton after a humiliating performance of *A Soldier's Tale*, past a 22 hour non-stop return to Costa Rica interrupted only by another agonizing border crossing, past two days of hectic reorganization in San Jose, past a brief visit to *La Casa de Los Tres Mundos* in Granada, Nicaragua marked by a fruitful work encounter with members of an independent dance group called *Desequilibrio*, past a mini-residency in the rural community of San Marcos de Colon, amidst the bleak, deforested terrain of southern Honduras, until we land on the bright side of the moon.

San Salvador

*The journey to La Luna long and the arrival exhausting, as arrivals tend to be.
But once accustomed to the new air and the new gravities, things fall into
place...2/4/00*

La Luna is an artistic oasis in the conservative cultural desert of San Salvador. Just before the peace accords were signed in 1991, ending a war that had ripped apart the country and exhausted its resources, Beatriz Alcaine envisioned a place where the artists of El Salvador could return to, artists who had been forced to leave the country or remain in hiding for years. She created La Luna, a combination gallery/restaurant/performance space which was to be our base for our long weekend of activities in San Salvador.

In addition to performances of *El Mundo de Max*, a presentation of the multimedia conference, and a errant attempt to present a fragmented version of *Sade* in combination with its video, the encounter of greatest resonance in San Salvador was the workshop we conducted on Theatre Anthropology.

Ever since we had the opportunity to visit the Odin Teatret in 1995 and subsequently spend periods of time in residence in Holstebro, Denmark, the work of Eugenio Barba, the Odin Teatret and the field of theatre study called Theatre Anthropology has been an influence on our work. Theatre Anthropology is a practical branch of theatre study which identifies certain principles, mostly physical, that performers in many traditions share. It is driven by the idea that the performer, through years of training, can shed the automatism of daily behaviour and develop what Eugenio Barba called an 'extra-daily' use of the body-mind. (for more information on Theatre Anthropology, see *The Secret Art of the Actor, A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology*, edited by Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese).

The workshop/conference is a practical introduction to the principles of Theatre Anthropology and attempts to convey, theoretically to observers and practically to participants, the lines along which Teatro Abya Yala has been working for the last four years. It is extremely demanding in its elaboration of physical training forms and a series of movements based on control of weight, balance, spinal tensions, physical readiness, all of which are fundamental principles of the training architecture developed by Barba. This vocabulary of movement is then applied to a relatively free-form improvisation (which I call an *hongo* which means 'mushroom' or 'fungus', because the improvisation can spread in unforeseen yet controlled territories), in which the participants must communicate in spontaneous, nonliteral ways using this fixed language of physical expression. Both the training exercises and the improvisation, the *hongo*, were fundamental to our work as a group and this was the first time we had opened up our approach to other people. For the participants and for us, the workshop became one of those rare moments of personal and professional contact. For the participants, the rigor of the physical vocabulary later applied to the creative improvisation -- the tension between the fixed form and open creative space -- opened up new places of expression and communication; for the actors of Abya Yala, being transmitters of information as well as sharing a form of work that had been particular to them forced us to clarify our own work as young professionals. In fact, during the *hongo* in San Salvador, I realized that this exercise and the ongoing use of it over the last few years was probably one of the glues that held the group together. To be in a space of communication that transcends language, that is irrational but not formless, that is physically communicative but not mundane -- this work became essential to the group and it was both personally satisfying and

professionally reinforcing that a brief work session with us could challenge and touch others so deeply.

The Other El Salvador

What can we do here that can be useful after we leave? What can we offer? ...2/8

The two hour trip from San Salvador to Guarjila takes us not just from the city to a small town, but across both the now invisible military checkpoints as well as the still tangible political, economic and social borders that separate *One* El Salvador from *the Other*; from the stronghold that was the capital whose fall ushered in the end of the war to the mountains that were the stronghold of the guerrilla, where in fact the terrible civil war was fought.

Guarjila, a hot and dusty town in the mountainous region of El Salvador where some of the heaviest fighting occurred, was the second of our artistic residencies, organized by a local theatre company called Teatro Nuevos Tiempos, a group that formed on the heels of the war and is now doing a remarkable job fomenting theatre practice throughout the entire region. While we shared with the people of Guarjila our entire program of work, our time there was marked for us more by who met and what we saw and heard than by the activities we shared. Neither the Costa Ricans in the group nor myself, a North American, have had much contact with the culture of war and Guarjila is a town where war is still fresh, still present, in their bodies and in their words. The percentage of people in town who have been wounded in action is high and everyone, everyone can and will tell stories of combat, of ambushes, of 'the fallen'. The clinics and the community centers are filled with images, murals, photos, of figures important in the struggle, from the ubiquitous Monsignor Romero to townspeople who figured in the ranks of the guerrilla. And Guarjila today, as poor and dirty as it is, is in many ways a testament to the victory of the FMLN (Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional): a self-governing community with an active town assembly led by a council of leaders, who will proudly show off their textile and carpentry workshops, their all-but-free pharmacy and fully staffed physical rehabilitation center, their mental health center and small hospital, to which people travel from as far as Honduras to receive medical care.

Before we had even heard of Guarjila, it was in fact an integral part of the tour; for the spark that gave life to the entire adventure was the idea to mount a production of Stravinsky's *A Soldier's Tale* and bring it to the many regions of Central America that were in the process of recovering from war. *A Soldier's Tale*, with Igor Stravinsky's famous music and Ferdinand Ramuz' less famous text, was created on the heels of World War I, driven by the question of how does the soldier reincorporate into society after the war is over. The story is drawn from a Russian fable about a soldier who, on leave, trades his soul (in this case his violin, his music) to the devil in exchange for riches. Tricked by the devil, he cannot return to his home and so embarks on a life of wandering and emptiness until the devil claims his due and takes him down to hell. While we maintained the music and the fable intact, we adapted the text and created a performance that would be accessible to the entire community, both children and adults alike, in the small Central American towns we would visit. Like medieval troubadours, we parked our truck in a central plaza or open space, converted it into our stage and performed in a broad, physical style that recovered the itinerant circus flavor that was the original intention of Stravinsky and Ramuz. In this way, *A Soldier's Tale*, the final event of our stay, was our farewell to the community that had housed us, fed us and opened up their doors to us for the course of the week.

The performance of *A Soldier's Tale* was also one of the events designed to be a catalyst for collaboration, a shared project between Teatro Abya Yala and the community. The size and technical necessities of the performance required a small team, usually a group of about 10 people, to help us set up the lights and sound, transform the truck into the stage, and help the actors during a critical costume change during the play. As for creative participation, in Portobelo artists of the Portobelo Workshop helped design and paint scenic elements for the performance -- a devil and a soldier -- that weaved their mythology of Congo, through visual representations, within the narrative of the play. In Guarjila, we were particularly interested in generating material from the town -- visual representations or songs or even stories -- that might speak to the issues of the soldier and the sense of displacement when the war is over. While we were unable to accomplish this, the performance did become a unique night of barter. The town contributed to the evening with a demonstration of stilts, acrobatics and juggling by the children with whom we had worked during the week, and the performance itself was interspersed by a small guitar group and a young group of folkloric dance. In addition, during the performance, the community of Guarjila so quickly and wholeheartedly sided with the devil against the protagonist soldier (the only place where this happened) that we were afforded the opportunity to see the play through the eyes of people whose lives were defined by their battle against 'the soldiers'.

In both Portobelo and Guarjila, this final activity, this testament to our time together, was not without unexpected drama, where seemingly disastrous events resulted fortuitous. In Portobelo, we were forced to suspend our opening performance on account of a torrential burst of rain, but later performed under perfect circumstances in what turned out to be a remarkable evening. And in Guarjila, during the setup, we accidentally blew our sound equipment and had to do the performance without the wireless microphones the actors normally used.

The 'show must go on' and it did, with one speaker and unamplified voices and terror gave way to joy as a natural circle of attention formed and a magical night of theatre emerged. Ironically, frying the sound equipment liberated the actors from the restraints of amplified voice and they fought every second of the way and it was miraculous; and what's more it's as it should have been in Guarjila - simple, rough, poor where, if you wanted to enjoy the show you had to listen, you had to do your part (where the amplified voices lessen the audience responsibility because you can hear but don't necessarily have to listen) and here, there, back there in hot, dusty Guarjila, in order to hear, they had to listen and the night turned into joy...2/13/00

Despite the fact that we were unable to galvanize artistic expressions of their experience in the war, what Guarjila would barter with Abya Yala in exchange for our parades and workshops and performances were not the dances or songs or celebrations of a tradition, as with Portobelo and later Sangrelaya; what they would ultimately leave with us was the deep impression, like a handprint, made by a culture of war -- the stories, a way of life, their point of view, consequences both horrible and admirable in a community that stands as a testament to survival.

Guatemala City

In Guatemala. A kind of arrival point. The 'big city' of Central America...2/17/00

There is a saying in Costa Rica that San Jose is surrounded by mountains but has no echo. Living and working in San Jose, as with many cities in Central America we have come to learn, can be

frustrating for its lack of nourishing feedback within the cultural community itself as well as a lack of contact with the outside world, much like living and working on an island. An essential component of the tour was the need to break out of the isolation, to present our work and receive feedback from audiences and colleagues off island. Performing in the cities of Central America was an important way for us reinforce our professional identity as a serious, well-trained theatre group working along rigorous methodological lines who have created an interesting and diverse body of work.

In Guatemala City, we had the opportunity to present our full urban package and, because we were there for a week, to form stronger ties with members of the professional community than had been possible in the cities prior. For example, the conference on Odissi dance became a flashpoint of contact between members of the dance community and us. Combining video footage of Odissi dance performances and work demonstrations with slides of Indian temple sculptures, the conference entitled *Sanjukta Panigrahi, Odissi Dance and the Re-Invention of a Tradition* forms a triangle between the life and work of the great dancer Sanjukta Panigrahi, the physical and dramaturgical principles of Odissi dance, and how a small group of artists in India in the late 1950's took an almost lost regional religious dance and transformed it into a classical Indian dance form. Issues the conference raises -- the rigors required in Eastern performance training, the reanimation of frozen form, that sometimes indistinguishable line separating theatre from dance -- helped forge a professional bond with members of the dance community in Guatemala around a shared a language of theory and practice.

In this way, our time in Guatemala City was marked by meeting people from the world of independent theatre, dance, film and video who were part of the same battle that we are: the battle to work outside the framework of institutions and organizations, to not give in to the mediocrity that surrounds us, and to develop a language of creation and performance that can be communicated, can be shared. There was the sense that the lines along which we had been working and the body of our work itself were an inspiration to some members of the theatre and dance community of Guatemala City, where the vision of our work was most understood, the discipline of our group most appreciated and where we felt professionally most at home away from home.

Another jump. Past Antigua, Guatemala, tourist haven of Central America where we performed *El Mundo de Max* for an audience of severely mentally and physically handicapped children; past our reentry into Honduras, marking the beginning of the end; past Copan where the famous pre-Hispanic ruins were closed due to a worker strike; past the now engulfing exhaustion in all of us, the battering tiredness of the seven hour set up and break down of *A Soldier's Tale*; past the impatience of eating, sleeping, shitting together, of listening to the same music over and over on the sometimes endless drives; past the inevitable irritability that comes with the routine of the same work, the same people day after day after day; past all that to what we thought was the prize, our reward for a long, hard tour, the paradise awaiting us on the shores of Honduras, what we mistakenly translated as Shangri-La.

Sangrelaya: Sea of Blood not Shangri-La

Fool that I was, I expected some paradise...and the reality is other. The conditions are hard: it is hot, the accommodations are cramped, the dirt and sand creep into every crevice, the lack of electricity makes things for the most part more

complicated with only flashes of romantic charm (above all, the night sky), and the six o'clock mosquito rampage is ferocious...3/6/00

The Garifunas are a culture that resulted from the combination between the Caribbean Arawaks and the Africans brought up north during the slave trade of the 1500's. The Arawaks on the island of St. Vincent fought violently against enslavement at the hands of the Spanish conquistadors and incorporated a small group of Africans who had escaped their captors. Together, a unique culture was created, the Garifuna or 'black Indians', a culture that developed its own language as well as cultivated dances, songs, and rituals that reflect the blend between the Arawak and the African. During various waves of immigration from the 1500s through the 1700s, the Garifunas came to populate some coasts of Central America with the greatest density along the northern coast of Honduras. There, the majority of the some million and a half Garifunas worldwide have lived throughout the last three hundred years, relatively independent from the Honduran mainstream culture.

The farther west you go along the Honduran coast, the more remote the Garifuna communities are until you come to a series of small towns which have neither roads nor even electricity. Such a community is Sangrelaya. It took us three days to arrive there, and the final assault was made half of us by land, in a special transport for the lunar-like roads, and the other half by sea. Organized by the Honduran Institute of Tourism with their director of Ethnic Activities, Natividad Rochez, as our guide, *the visit of Teatro Abya Yala was the first time a group of performers had come into their village*. We were travelling to a place that, rich in its own culture, really had no idea what 'theatre' is, had never seen 'actors', didn't really know what a 'play' is, and basically had no idea what to expect of us.

To get a sense of the anticipation the community had for our visit, picture the following: our first day in Sangrelaya, recuperating from the journey, I was sitting on log in the midday heat, doing nothing. In minutes a semicircle of about thirty people formed around me waiting for some song or dance or 'pantomimica' as they said. Do something....that's what you're here for. Now I am director, and soon the uselessness of my chosen profession began to wash over me as I searched frantically for something that was in the least bit entertaining. My mind settled on the Beatles, whom they had never heard of (can we fathom such a place?) and offered them an out of tune rendition of St. Peppers Lonely Hearts Club Baaaaaand. Soon of course they grew bored with me and I could only count the hours before the actors would take to the streets with our more entertaining *pasacalles*.

And when the *pasacalles* did explode onto their main and only street to the wonderment, and even a little fear of the town, it was the first time they had seen something like actors on stilts with large animal masks or riding a funny, big bike. The *pasacalles* was always important as it introduced our presence in the town; but here, due to the expectation of our visit and the novelty of our entertainment, it was a such a defining moment that the entire week we were followed by the question: Are there going to be clowns today?

El Mundo de Max, our adaptation of Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*, is the story of a little girl who, alone in her room, invents worlds of her imagination. Physical, colorful, with both song and dance, it is a performance that had proven itself to be enjoyable for children from kindergarten up through sixth grade. In Sangrelaya, due to the amount of children who would see the show, we divided into two groups: kindergarten thru third grade and fourth grade and above. The play is more appropriate for the first group, yet in Sangrelaya we saw how the youngsters enjoyed the play much less than their older brothers and sisters. This was not only due to the fact

that Garifuna is the first language of the community and little children only begin to communicate in Spanish until the 1st and 2nd grade, but moreover because we were in a community that had little to almost no contact with the theatrical form. Without television, radio or a tradition of theatrical dramatization, there is no development of being spectators to a dramatized story unfolding. And so the confusion and impatience before this strange form was demonstrated by the young children, whereas the older children and even the adults, more mature and receptive, were willing and able to follow and enjoy a childrens show. For us, this was an important lesson in the shifting context of reception, and the need on our parts to be open and aware of these shifts.

Trying to make sense of Sangrelaya, which thus far has eluded me. The workshops today helped. We are clearly an attraction, crowds gather wherever we are and go, like rock stars or sports figures, followed around town, and watched as we do something as mundane as wash clothes or read a book or now write in our journals; but the question arises: what purpose freak show?...3/6/00

If the pasacalles was the icebreaker, setting the tone for our stay -- we were here to play, and in some way rediscover the spirit of play for all comers -- it was the workshop we offered to children and adolescents of the community that solidified our presence in these towns. With the workshop, we demonstrated that we were there not only to perform and entertain, but also to offer something of ourselves, something that may have more lasting value and that could be cultivated after the performances are over.

The workshop -- an introduction to stilts, acrobatics and juggling -- was a way for us to share with Sangrelaya, as we had in Portobelo and Guarjila, a series of theatrical skills with young people who in these sorts of communities have little organized physical outlets. The dynamic of the workshop was simple: we would divide a group of about 40 young people between the ages of 9-17 and introduce them to the fundamentals of each of these tasks: the basics of tumbling and acrobatics, the first exercises of juggling and, in the case of the stilts, give them the chance to mount a pair of practice stilts and try to walk around. What was so exciting about the workshop, what in fact became an important point of contact between us, was their learning firsthand how difficult, challenging and ultimately thrilling these theatrical skills could be. By experiencing the demands of mental concentration and physical coordination that these activities require, the participants (and many observers) understood the difficulty of our craft and the rigor of a profession that tries to disguise its seriousness through play. As a result, an important population in the town developed a respect and admiration for what we do. And most importantly, in a town like Sangrelaya where these sorts of tricks had never been seen, for those who managed to briefly maintain three balls in the air or sustain a headstand or even take some steps on stilts, the sense of accomplishment, of confidence in a newfound ability, and admiration from their peers were of immeasurable impact for them and great satisfaction for us.

The workshop was one of those intangible links with the people of the town, the importance of which we experienced when we did not have it. For in those few places where we did not have the week to be seen on the streets or to offer the workshop and share in the difficulty of our work, we were little more than a passing circus. In these cases, in one particular town in fact, the children had no ties inhibiting them from behaving disrespectfully and even harmfully towards us, an experience that taught us the enormous difference between becoming a member of the community, albeit briefly, and simply passing through and acting like a clown.

As for cultural exchange in Sangrelaya, there were various evenings of Garifuna song and dance, encounters with a tradition rich in music and dance that is becoming influential throughout Central America. Nights held outdoors, lit by the one instrument we could connect with three hundred meters of extension cord to the nearest electrical plant, nights of singing, drumming, chanting, dancing, where we were the honorary guests of and willing participants in the assortment of Garifuna dances: the punta, the pachanga, the mascaro, dances that have become the centerpiece of Garifuna rituals and ceremonies. These nights were the official acts of 'cultural exchange', and the community was generous in their compliance. Yet in a situation like our visit to Sangrelaya, cultural exchange was not the organized nights but rather a daily event, where in return for us-as-spectacle (sometimes performing, sometimes not) was offered the entire gamut of their Garifuna culture, a daily barter with their way of life, spearheaded by the Figueroa family who fed us and gave us language class and cooking lessons and helped us home in the flashlit darkness after sundown.

Barter last night. El Mascaro interesting, a kind of buffoon with mask and costume of Conquistador...who plays a role similar to that which Yaneka played in the Congo: pulling people into the dance, mocking, ruling...curious how two traditions share a background in relation to slavery in the new world, share certain components of their song and dance, share a character central to their rituals, even share a game with language (Mascaro instead of Mascara) yet know almost nothing of each other....3/7/00

One of the most fascinating phenomena we encountered was this similarity between the character of the Congo in the the Raising of the Flag and the Mascaro, the principal character in the Garifuna dance of the same name. Both are mockeries of the ruling authority from which the slaves originally escaped -- the Congo a mock-king and the Mascaro a parody of the Conquistador. Both are the master of ceremonies of the night, controlling the space, dictating the event. Even the name *Mascaro*, whose final ending should be an 'a' rather than an 'o' reflects one of the comic devices utilized by the congo, the linguistic inversion of masculine and feminine endings for comic effect during the time of festivity. It is remarkable that only today, these two very distinct Afro-Caribbean cultures are beginning to enter into contact and realize that they may in fact share very specific origins as well as evolutions.

Despite this linkage between the two Afro-Caribbean cultures, what was most striking during the tour was the tremendous diversity of experience, of culture, we encountered. What separates the town of Guarjila in El Salvador from Portobelo in Panama from the Garifuna community of Sangrelaya along the northern coast of Honduras is but a small reflection of how the geography of the area and proximity of the countries say almost nothing of the richness and profound difference that exist on this very small strip of land bridging the north and the south.

We all want to go home, and are counting the days. The seconds become minutes which become hours and these hours draw us closer to the end...we are all weary. It is a fact...3/8/00

Little Hells

From the very outset, at our first border crossing between Costa Rica and Panama, we experienced what would be an ongoing nightmare of the tour, crossing the borders. Averaging five hours per border and lasting sometimes up to seven, as it did the first time, the borders are hot, dusty, chaotic no-manslands, all subtle variations on the same game of terror in which the

rules of crossing are unwritten and unknown but somehow applied, of bureaucratic roadblocks that discourage just this sort of free movement in a region smaller than California. The simple fact of taking our work to five different Central American countries was in fact by no means simple due to the hellish nature of the many border crossings we had to endure. The tale of these little hells that fragment Central America was given its final chapter as we crossed the last border into Costa Rica and encountered an officious zealot of a woman who was convinced that all theatre activities are in adoration of Satan and that we were in fact evil ambassadors from Hell.

The endless nightmare of these infernal frontiers...3/10/00

The Rest

The rest was not the rest of the time in Honduras, where we, not as thick-skinned as we would have liked to have imagined, recuperated from the hard life in Sangrelaya with a night in Trujillo in what was for us a luxury motel: separate rooms, a hot shower and cable tv. The rest was not our brief pass through El Progreso, marked by a performance of *El Mundo de Max* beneath a sweltering midday sun for children who live in a 'macroshelter', a cement slum of a village built for the displaced people who live in the emergency (but rapidly becoming permanent) aftermath of Hurricane Mitch. The rest was not even the rest we had in Tegucigalpa where we performed but twice over five days -- a downright vacation after giving over fifty performances and workshops in more than 20 cities and towns over 11 weeks coming into contact with perhaps 15,000 people throughout Central America. No, that brief respite before heading home was not the rest.

The rest is now; for, like Mitch, the intensity of an event is measured in its aftermath, in its scar. And Abya Yala, or at least the group that went on this tour, did not in fact survive the tour. What we had created and maintained for a few short, productive years no longer exists and will not again. A brief life, even for a theatre group. But perhaps this Abya Yala was meant to do this one thing of tremendous scope, ambition and impact. The tour may have burned us up as a group but, by pushing us to the limits of effort and interaction, has left in its place fundamental questions about the nature of theatre, about the nature of our lives: what is a theatre group? how can it survive in the age of the individual? what is the role of theatre to its community and to itself? what is left and lasting after the performances are over, after the bus and truck pull away?

And now, with flashes of clarity that the tour of Central America affords us, the core of Abya Yala is left to take on the questions, take on the rest.

The Tour has landed. Now the rest begins....3/27/00

David Korish
San Jose, Costa Rica
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