When Noah Meets Mitch: The Medieval Mysteries in Contemporary Honduras

John Fleming

Theatre is a very pragmatic art, and for each given production there is an equation to be gotten right. – Tom Stoppard

Stoppard's words roll through my mind as I stand in the *macroalbergue* that perches on the hillside overlooking El Progreso, Honduras. It is December 1999. Fourteen months earlier Hurricane Mitch swept through Honduras leaving behind wreckage of Biblical proportions. Around me this evening is the temporary housing that still shelters 1000s of people, primarily young children, who were displaced by the devastating storm. Already poor people were made even more desperately impoverished, and yet somehow they must find a way to go on. Providing part of that spark of hope is Teatro La Fragua. Indeed, when the theatre company arrived earlier that evening at this shelter, the buzz of "teatro, teatro, teatro está aqui" quickly ran through the community and many of the kids staked out their seats a couple of hours before the show was to begin. The play being done that night in the relief shelter was the story of Noah and the Great Flood. The confluence of subject matter and setting was poignant. But then again, as theatre artists, La Fragua implicitly knew what Stoppard had stated. Throughout their twenty-three year history, they have always been trying to get the equation right. Often the answer has been the use of a theatrical style that might best be described as neo-medieval postmodernism.

Historical Background

Honduras has suffered a long history of dependence and underdevelopment, and while statistics vary, in the Western Hemisphere Honduras typically ranks only above Haiti in terms of poverty and standard of living. Unemployment and underemployment range from 35-50%, illiteracy

or semi-literacy hovers around 50%, and the minimum wage (which most do not make) is about $1000 per year.[1] Amidst such dire economic circumstances, made even worse by Hurricane Mitch, a full-time theatre company seems an unlikely missionary venture for a Catholic priest. But intertwined with this stat sheet of material poverty is a pervasive cultural poverty; i.e. social scientists have long identified the "lack of a strong national identity" as one of Honduras's deeply rooted problems.[2] It is this lack of a cultural identity that Teatro La Fragua seeks to redress.

Teatro La Fragua ("The Forge Theatre," as in to forge a national identity) was founded by and continues to be run by American Jesuit priest Jack Warner.[3] Through theatre, La Fragua seeks to provide spiritual and cultural nourishment to the people of Honduras. Warner finds inspiration in the words of Nicaraguan priest and poet Ernesto Cardenal: "Cardenal once said man has four basic needs: food, shelter, prayer, and music. I interpret music as all the arts and that a people without an art form, a people without an expression is not a people."[4] Likewise, in the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch, as La Fragua performed in the numerous relief shelters, Warner came to believe that the dictum "Man does not live by bread alone" is even more true in extreme circumstances than in normal ones.

After getting his M.F.A. in Directing from Chicago's Goodman School of Drama, Warner arrived in Honduras in January 1979.[5] Modeled in part on El Teatro Campesino, La Fragua began by doing agit-prop pieces and then started to develop along the lines of commedia-based works, beginning with Lope De Rueda and culminating with a Honduran adaptation of Molière's *Scapino*.[6] While these shows were successful, Warner and his lead actors realized that La Fragua was straying from their mission, that they were becoming a theatre for the more educated, more middle-class urban audiences of San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa. When Warner examined the situation, he recognized historical antecedents. Commedia dell'arte was a Renaissance form that
was nurtured in the newly emerging urban centers, cities where an audience had already been formed by the medieval theatre.

Though a priest, Warner did not stage any religious-based plays until Christmas of 1984. By the following Christmas, the company decided that the best way to reach the rural campesino audience was by trying to re-create the development of post-classical Western theatre. In other words, they turned to Medieval theatre as a model. Warner explains: "The church is the one thing that gets to every village. It is the one thing—it's a physical

plant that's already set up as a place where people gather naturally. It's part of people's natural routine. Not all the people of course, but it hits all segments of society."[7] In other words, in a culture with virtually no theatre tradition, to get to an audience which often has never seen theatre before, La Fragua had to take the theatre to the people. Thus, throughout 1986 and 1987 La Fragua worked full-time on developing a gospel dramatization program which they entitled *¡El Evangelio en Vivo!* (*The Gospel: Live!*). The program possesses two branches: 1) the professional troupe's performance of Bible-based plays centered around the Christmas and Easter seasons, and 2) workshops where they teach techniques for dramatizing the Gospels.[8] Both programs involve extensive touring throughout the country, and the performances can be manifested both as liturgical drama and as vernacular religious drama. It is the Christmas cycle that shall be focussed on here.

The Christmas Cycle

Every year since 1984 La Fragua has staged a work called *Navidad Nuestra* (*Our Christmas*). This work is indebted to the medieval cycle plays, and similar to their medieval counterparts, La Fragua varies which playlets are performed each year. For example, the 1984 show included the stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and the Flood, and the Nativity, including the story of the Three Wise Men, Herod, and the Slaughter of the Innocents.[9] Though Biblically based, these shows are given contemporary relevancy. For example, in La Fragua's version of Adam and Eve the forbidden fruit is a banana, an apt symbol for the quintessential banana republic. Likewise, the impetus for doing a Christmas show was as an antidote to the depressing economic conditions that preclude the material aspects of secular Christmas celebrations. Thus, the company has always stressed the entertainment aspect of theatre. In that first production, the genealogy of Christ was scat-sung and accompanied by break dancing. Likewise, La Fragua decided that their first Christmas offering should end with everybody juggling for baby Jesus. In other words the show ultimately tries to convey a feeling of joy and hope.

One of the biggest problems facing La Fragua is whether or not they have any female performers in the company—there is still a cultural taboo against women performing, against exhibiting their bodies on stage. Likewise, since La Fragua frequently tours the country, involving overnight stays, the actress risks rumors about her reputation. Thus, the presence or absence of actresses is partly what determines which episodes compose the Christmas cycle. When there are no actresses, the Virgin Mary is depicted via a drawing

and then the text is based more on the Matthew Gospel, which emphasizes the Three Wise Men, whereas the Luke Gospel serves as the basis for the Mary material as well as scenes involving Mary's cousin Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist. While an actress has rarely stayed with La Fragua for more than a year, in recent years they have had at least two actresses in the company, as well as a couple of female performers from the dramatization groups formed in the local churches.

In 1998 Warner assembled and copyrighted a set cycle of plays. That text served as the basis for the show I saw in 1999. That *Navidad Nuestra* text mixes adaptations/portions of two 12th century plays [*Auto de los Reyes Magos* (*Mystery Play of the Magi*, Spain, c. 1150) and *The Play of Herod*, France (Fleury)] with the gospel stories from the first three chapters of Luke and the first two chapters of Matthew.[10] While there is a written/spoken text, like their medieval inspiration, La Fragua incorporates a lot of music and dance, and so the production text provides a much richer theatre experience than is evident from simply reading the play. Notably, this current cycle does not include any Old Testament episodes but rather revolves around the Nativity.[11]

The play begins with the creation done as an interpretative modern dance set to Mozart's *Wind Serenade no. 10 in B-flat, K.361-Adagio*. The opening movements of this fluid five and a half minute dance suggest the dawn of creation and Christ as the light of the world. The dance proceeds to depict the death and Resurrection of Christ as well as Christ watching over and guiding his apostles as they invite others to follow him. The accompanying text, spoken intermittently by a small chorus, is drawn from the prologue to the Gospel of John. It foregrounds both God as the Creator and "the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."[12] The dance closes with a homage to the Virgin Mary, and the lines: "But those who received and believed in Him, He granted them the privilege to be sons of God" (1). While not an explicitly evangelizing group, La Fragua does celebrate the religious significance of Christ's birth and what it can mean to those who believe.

In keeping with their neo-medieval postmodern style, the show moves from this dance number to John the Baptist preaching in the desert to a scene where they rap out the genealogy of Christ, back to a scene where an angel announces that Elizabeth is pregnant with John the Baptist. So in the first few scenes there is a mixture of Biblical text, classical music, classical dance, rap music, rap-based dance moves, an interlude of Spanish song and dance, some entrances done via cartwheels and gymnastics, and a deliberate break in the

chronological telling of the story. Some of the music is programmed on computer, some is played live, and some is the percussive element of the actors themselves. Overall, the opening scenes clearly establish the performance conventions: a Bible-based text presented in a lively, eclectic manner.

This performance style might be described as neo-medieval postmodernism. It is post-modern in that they freely intermingle a multitude of different artistic styles and periods.[13] Besides the eclectic mix of music and dance styles, the written portion uses Biblical, Medieval, and original texts which are performed via Paul Sills's story theatre techniques, including narrators (performed alternately by the different actors as well as done collectively) who provide exposition, description, and/or commentary. Likewise, visually the plays mix medieval and modern sensibilities. The inspiration for the visual style comes from Medieval and Renaissance paintings in which there is no attempt to create a historically accurate picture of life in the time of Christ. Instead the actors wear bright, colorful contemporary costumes. At the same time some of the pictorial groupings are inspired by compositions found in Michelangelo, Leonardo, Rembrandt, and Breughel. Overall, La Fragua's goal is to make these Bible stories relevant to contemporary Honduran life, and the neo-medieval postmodern style helps achieve that goal.[14]

In terms of content, the up-front placement of John the Baptist preaching in the desert establishes the significance of the birth of Christ, which will serve as the central subject of the play. The text of the scene, taken from Luke's gospel, also contains some relevant social teaching. It includes lines such as "Whoever has two shirts must give one to the man who has none, and whoever has food must share it" (3). It also features moments where government officials are advised not to overcharge for their services and where two soldiers ask John the Baptist what they should do. John answers: "Rob no one, neither by violence nor by false accusation, and be content with your wages, instead of extorting from the people" (3). This line is Warner's gloss on the gospel text and is a direct comment on the military/political corruption which is rampant in Honduras.[15] While the John preaching scene establishes the moral framework and religious significance of Christ's birth, it also ends with his arrest and imprisonment. While true to the Biblical source, the moment also highlights a contemporary parallel, the continuing risk faced by those who speak out against those in power.[16]

The seriousness of the John the Baptist scene is then counterpointed by the genealogy rap. A traditionally numbing piece of text is given an

unforgettably lively performance.[17] While the list of names links Christ to humankind, it is the infectious rap beat that engages the audience. Warner explains the seeming incongruity of using rap to deliver a Biblical text: "Musically, rap serves the same function as psalm tone; you can take any narrative text and set it to music."[18] Indeed, they use rap about ten more times in the show, thereby using a basic, actor-generated beat as one of the musical throughlines of the production.

The hard percussive rap beat gives way to the gentle strings of a guitar as a narrator recites the opening of the Gospel of Luke. The moment seeks to establish the authority of the narrator, and closes with the implication that this story is being told tonight "so that you may know the truth of what you have been taught" (6). Not surprisingly, La Fragua seeks to reinvoke the religious aspect of Christmas. Actor Rigoberto Fernández comments: "The people of Honduras do not understand the true meaning of Christmas. So we attempt to deliver the message of what is the true story. We tell them everything that happened, according to the Bible, because the people don't know the story. To many of them, Christmas is staying up till midnight, drinking and eating. But our idea is for the people to understand that Christmas is something beautiful."[19] Actor José Ramón "Chito" Inestroza elaborates on their mission: "Our tradition of *Navidad Nuestra* is important. We know that we are a poor country and people are locked into political and social problems. Yet, during Christmas, there is happiness when Christ, our Creator, is born and people receive him with joy. All of our plays are done with a lot of joy and a lot of love."[20]

While there is a religious component to La Fragua, in contrast to the conservative nature of many North American churches Warner can be counted among the Jesuits who identify with the progressive social forces of Latin America. To Warner, religion is not so much a set of creeds and dogma as it is a way of living life, of putting faith and values into action. In 1982, Warner remarked: "We're moving toward a Christian humanism, I think. When people begin to be proud of who they are as persons, as Hondurans, they will feel obliged to put the Gospel into practice in their own situation."[21] The Gospel's message of justice, equality, and treating all people with dignity and respect are just some of the aspects the theatre company hopes to see put into practice, at least on the micro level of society.

While the subject matter is religious, the manner of presentation is energetic and entertaining, featuring numerous musical interludes and dances. From scene five onward, the text proceeds in chronological order to tell the

story of the angel Gabriel announcing the births of John and Jesus, through their births to the visit of the Three Wise Men on to Herod and the slaughter of the innocents. It closes with Mary and Joseph taking the infant Jesus back to Nazareth, and the cast gathering to sing "The Bells of Bethlehem," a joyous song, seen from the perspective of the shepherds/peasants, in honor of the Christ child. While the story is familiar, it is La Fragua's performance style that is noteworthy.

Using virtually no props or scenery, La Fragua fills the theatre space via a theatrical, presentational approach. Angels enter via cartwheels and rap out their divine messages. Comic relief comes from actors portraying farm animals, crowing as roosters, snorting as pigs, and baaing as sheep on the hillside. Traditional European-based songs such as "Silent Night" (Kenny G's instrumental version accompanied by a ballet-style dance) are mixed with line dances and Spanish Christmas carols (*villancicos*) from Spain, Peru, Chile, Argentina, and Honduras. Accompanied by a standard Spanish *villancico*, the Three Wise Men do an original dance that is a combination cakewalk and a camel-walk step as they follow a cloth banner depicting the star of Bethlehem. An Angel awakes the shepherds who perform a graceful ballet, set to an Argentinean song, as they proceed to the manger (a line drawing on a banner) to pay homage to the infant child.[22] The Flight into Egypt is a lively *West Side Story*-ish dance set to Rubén Blades' *Caminos verdes* (*Green Roads*).[23] It is a dynamic performance style that eschews psychological realism and naturalistic sets in favor a Grotowski-inspired, movement-based approach where the actors must also be proficient in song and dance.

Interspersed with these energetic music/dance scenes a chilling subplot, rife with contemporary relevancy, percolates. When the Wise Men meet King Herod, he offers himself up as an object of worship, but then he learns they seek another King, one destined to be "the Lord of the Earth" (22). Herod is jealous, and when the Wise Men have departed, he expresses his wrath: "I am not dead yet and I will not abandon my post. Call my General! Call my armed forces and all my army! Let my fury drop sharply as their swords fall on that subversive child!" (24). Herod is a man who loves his power, a man who will act ruthlessly to protect what he has. In an ensuing scene, in a speech written by Warner and former La Fragua actor Julio Paz, Herod animates his army. He enters via military music and amidst marching troops. His speech is filled with the phrasings of Latin American dictators who invoke a National Security Doctrine that justifies the elimination of

"subversives."[24] Herod, calling himself "commander-in-chief," claims to be acting in the interest of "national sovereignty" and he views the military as "the faithful guardians of peace and democracy" (29). Herod sees the Christ child as representing a conspiracy that will "destabilize our order," "take away our power," "finish your civil rights," and "fill our beloved country with slavery" (29). It is an appeal to patriotism and a vow of retribution: "Death to anyone or anything that attempts to change our system, which is the best, and which gives us happiness and prosperity" (30). In the end Herod issues his decree to kill all children under two, an action he argues is "for the peace of our country, for the greater good" (30). By the end of the speech he has the other eight performers (as his army) chanting "Death to the subversive child!" (30). Like the military and paramilitary groups of repressive regimes, these soldiers have been swayed by the rhetoric and embrace the blood lust of the cause.

The Herod speech scene moves straight into the "Slaughter of the Innocents" scene. As they march in 1-4-4 formation, the soldiers recite a Latin text pulled from the 12th century *Play of Herod*.[25] Since the words are in Latin, the text of the scene is indistinguishable to the audience, but the sense of the scene is not. These are soldiers on a mission, and the accompanying electronic music (based on the 12th-century text), set to a military-marching beat, adds to the atmosphere of carnage. When the text is concluded, Herod unleashes his troops. Initially, the soldiers circle the stage, striking their death-blows on a set beat, but then the repression grows wider and more chaotic as the soldiers strike out on their own, moving about the stage, hacking away at their victims. It closes with the soldiers gathering center stage and striking a triumphal pose. In performance it is a harrowing pantomimed scene that gains its theatrical force from the jarring electronic music (as well as an indistinguishable Latin-based rhythmic chant) and from the harsh red light which grows in intensity as the number of massacred children mount. In 1999, Warner added the ironic touch of having the accompanying Biblical text (Matthew 2:16-18) be read by a group of children. Overall, it is disturbingly effective scene that suggests the harshness of Honduran life, both in terms of the overt repression of political dissidents and via the subtextual knowledge of the tremendous odds facing Honduran youths—they are the innocents who face a social, political, and economic system that gives them limited chance to succeed and rise above the poverty into which they are born.

The horror of "The Slaughter of the Innocents" gives way to a more hopeful denouement. In a tense scene the Holy Family evades armed patrols and escapes. Again, the principal characters pantomime the action, while the rest of the cast sings a dirge-like song which conveys the story. The scene is particularly effective because it involves the comedy of the actor whose facial expression and bodily movements capture the attributes of a stubborn burro that does not want to move, but which must be pulled along. Again, the physicality is impressive as the actor hunches over (but remains standing) as Mary sits on the small of his back. In this awkward position he is able to carry her around the stage. The last scene continues the sense of hope as the Holy Family waits out the period of persecution is are ultimately able to return to their homeland. Finally, the cast gathers center stage to sing a traditional Spanish Christmas Carol in honor of the new-born savior. These closing scenes from Herod's wrath to the final song and dance epitomize the nature of *Navidad Nuestra.* The scenes suggest both the harsh struggle Hondurans face as well as La Fragua's desire to bring some joy and hope to the Christmas season.

La Historia de Noé

Originally the Noah play was done intermittently as part of the Christmas cycle. By the late 1990s it had been out of rep for a number of years, but in the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch, Warner decided it was a text ripe for revival. In the post-hurricane environment, staging the play carried a certain degree of risk; the impact on an audience could be cathartic or it could be crushing.[26] Adhering to their principle of stressing the entertainment value of theatre, La Fragua crafts a Noah story that is rich in comedy and which ultimately tries to convey a message of hope.

When Warner developed the Noah play in the 1980s, he seized upon a seeming Biblical footnote. In Genesis, Noah is credited with inventing wine, and so in La Fragua's play Noah is an inventor. As the play opens Noah has recently invented alcohol, and he is suffering from a severe hangover. Thus his wife's nagging (a dynamic borrowed from the Medieval Chester cycle play) is all the more aggravating. It is in this hangover state that God first speaks to Noah, but Noah simply wants to be left alone, telling God to come back later. However, once Noah realizes that it is indeed God and that there is this harsh reality that God is going to destroy humankind they get into a discussion regarding the building of the ark and the collecting of the animals.

This section shows how La Fragua can treat a familiar story in a distinctively fresh and funny way:

NOAH: Yes, Lord as you instruct me I shall do. But God? What is an ark?

GOD: A large boat. Haven't you ever read the Bible?

NOAH: And how am I supposed to read the Bible if it has not been written yet?

GOD: Noah, build me an ark. . . . I am going to send a flood to cover the Earth and destroy all the life in all corners of the world. Everything that is on the earth shall perish.

NOAH: That's heavy.

GOD: But with you I shall make a pact. In the ark you will place yourself, your children, and your wife.

NOAH: God—

GOD: Yes?

NOAH: Are you sure my wife has to go with us on the ark?

GOD: Definitely. You shall also take one male and female of all the animals that are in the world, so that they will live afterwards, just like you.

NOAH: All the animals of the world?

GOD: Two animals of every kind.

NOAH: Even the possums?

GOD: One male and one female of all the animals. But don't bring on board two-legged possums.

NOAH: One male and one female of all the animals.

GOD: Also, bring together—

NOAH: Excuse me, God?

GOD: Yes.

NOAH: What about the hermaphroditic animals?

GOD: That is your concern. Also gather—

NOAH: Excuse me, God?

GOD: Yes.

NOAH: Even the cockroaches?

GOD: Don't worry about the cockroaches they will still be around.

NOAH: Why don't we finish them all at once?

GOD: Not even God himself can do away with all the cockroaches.

NOAH: The way I figure it, if you are really God and you are going to finish the human race, then couldn't you also finish with the

cockroaches too?
GOD: I wish that was the way it could be.
NOAH: But how can you tell me you are the all-powerful God and at the same time—
GOD: Noah, everyone in the world has the right to make a mistake once in a while.[27]

That scene is indicative of the whole as it includes comedy, the occasional anachronism, and though dealing with a serious subject, it does not take itself too seriously. Indeed, the scene ends with God agreeing to Noah's one condition—that his mother-in-law be left behind.

The ensuing scenes focus on Noah revealing the plan to his wife and children. Naturally they are skeptical. His wife thinks he is still drunk and hung over, while the kids insist they get paid for any work they do. Likewise, the characters must deal with the practical problems of how to execute God's plan. For example, Noah's wife wonders how they can possibly pay for all the food that will be needed on the ark. Noah's solution is simple—put it on credit. When all is said and done there will be no one left to collect. In this regard the glib humor of the play does not provide viable solutions to the practical problems facing Hondurans. On the other hand, Noah's sons are painted with realistic strokes. They are carefree kids who like to drink, who dream of becoming the next Backstreet Boys, and whose get-rich-quick scheme is to open a brewery.[28] They believe life is to be lived to the fullest and they are not going to help their father unless he pays them for their labor. When they do finally agree to help they are buoyed by the thought that they will be able to throw an end of the world party.

The second half of the play focuses on the execution of the plan. The locals think Noah has gone insane, and they bombard him with anachronistic insults, wondering if he is building the Eiffel Tower or a sports stadium. The locals do not believe that the end is coming, and so they return to their partying. Metaphorically one can interpret this scene as a contemporary religious message for people to tend to their spiritual sides, to get their lives in order before death arrives.

On the other hand, the play never descends into heavy didacticism, but instead continues to joke freely about alcohol and about the problems they are having with the animals. For example, the crabs pinch their butts, holes need to be cut in the ceiling for the giraffes, and the termites have to be put in a pot so they do not eat the ark. Also, once Noah's wife hears that there are

rats, fleas, crickets and cockroaches aboard, she has no desire to go anywhere near the ark. In the end the only way her sons can convince her to get on board is by getting her drunk. Once she tastes the alcohol she is eager for more, and the only place she can get more is on the ark, for the boys made sure that the distillery was safely aboard. Notably there is no sermonizing about the evils of alcohol; instead it is played as pure comedy, a reflection of the pleasantly intoxicating aspects of alcohol.

In contrast to *Navidad*, which uses about a dozen song and dance sections, *Noé* is a more literary work, with fewer theatrical effects. The notable exception is the storm scene. Through electronic music, cymbal crashes, and flickering lights the impending storm has been previously suggested.[29] In the five-minute flood scene those sound and light effects intensify and a large blue sheet covers the stage. The light ripple of the cloth/ water gradually intensifies until it is cascading waves. Noah's family stands upstage of the cloth going through a choreographed set of movements which suggests the building of the storm and their being tossed about on the waves of the roaring sea. During the peak of the storm, the three neighbors who had heckled Noah's family return, but now they are rolling and splashing in the waves (both above and below the cloth, which has a center hole through which limbs poke; a moment which adds comic relief to a serious scene). Gradually the storm subsides, and in slow-motion movements the family comes back together. They have survived and can now breathe a sigh of relief that the storm has passed.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch, Warner added a short scene to the play. After the rains have stopped, Noah's family stands on the bow of the ark and they survey the land. They see an airport under water, and they see cars, refrigerators, and televisions floating down the street. These are sights that no Honduran will ever forget, the sight of their homes and their possessions washed away. In another appropriate touch, the raven and the dove that Noah sends out are played by children who dance the flight of the birds as they seek out dry land. In many ways children, the new target audience of many of La Fragua's efforts, are the future hope for Honduras. Likewise, there is hope when the dove dances back with the olive branch, a symbol of peace. When Noah and his family step out of the ark the cast gathers center stage and recites God's promise (spliced together from portions of Genesis Chapters 8 and 9) to never again destroy the earth through a flood. As they finish this speech three child actors enter with a cloth rainbow, the symbol of

God's alliance with humankind. As the rainbow is stretched across the stage, the cast sings a series of "Alleluias."

As they chime out the final "Alleluia," the cast points to the rainbow, the Biblical symbol of hope and of God's enduring love. In the current Honduran context, La Fragua's implication is clear. Just as Noah's family has survived the great flood, so too La Fragua's audience has survived Hurricane Mitch. Admittedly it has left behind an atmosphere of fear, sadness, and frustration. But amidst the numbing poverty and the seemingly insurmountable task of rebuilding, La Fragua, through their performances and through their dramatization workshops, hopes to help people recover the will to go on. Indeed, surveying the crowd in the relief shelter, director Edy Barahona commented: "Mitch has put our 20 years of theatre experience to the test. We couldn't help materially or economically, but psychologically we have helped, I hope, our people, who have been traumatized, to go on. . . . In many ways, all the things we've done these last fourteen months, while artistically maybe not our best, in many ways, they have been the most important thing we've done as teatro."[30]

Conclusion

Religious-based material, centered around Christmas and Easter, is only one part of La Fragua's repertory.[31] Other cornerstones include dramatizations of Honduran myths and folklore, an original dance/theatre piece about the dreams and aspirations of Hondurans, a children's play which use figures from the Popol-Vuh (the Mayan sacred book), and most recently they have completed a trilogy of plays on Central American history.[32] In addition to their own work, since 1988, for about six weeks each summer La Fragua hosts a "Season of Artistic Expression" in which theatre, dance, music, mime, and puppetry groups from throughout Central America perform. La Fragua is also actively involved in teaching. The gospel dramatization workshops are done intermittently throughout the year, while in their home theatre they offer dance classes four days per week. Since Mitch, they have emphasized a story-telling for kids program (in the shelters and in the schools) that involves a partial degree of dramatization done either by the actors or the kids.[33] They have also branched out in their cultural endeavors. Since 1995 La Fragua has sponsored a classical music hour every night on Radio Progreso, with Saturday nights devoted to jazz, African music, or some other type of world music. Since 1999 La Fragua has hosted a weekly videoteca, showing a children's movie in the afternoon and a non-mainstream adult movie in the evening.[34]

Thus, on many different fronts, La Fragua is offering cultural opportunities for Hondurans.

Overall, while there is much work to do, La Fragua is well on their way to achieving their goal of forging a Honduran national identity, of trying to spur cultural pride in being Honduran. They have performed and/or conducted workshops in Mexico, Cuba, Belize, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador, Colombia, Spain, and the United States. They have been the subject of an award-winning documentary film and at the Fall 2001 Chicago Latino Film Festival they were the featured international artist.[35] They have even made it into Walter Meserve's time line of theatre history. In other words they have helped put Honduras on the cultural map, and any history of the arts in Honduras must include them. More importantly, in their adoption of the Catholic church's "preferential option for the poor", they have used popular theatre techniques to break through some very bleak living conditions to provide some measure of hope and happiness. They know that within the social-political-economic matrix of Honduras that they are not going to overthrow the system or radically alter the landscape of material poverty, but rather they are a theatre which uses a variety of means to raise the cultural standard of living in Honduras.[36]

Southwest Texas State

Endnotes

[1] Since statistics vary by source and year, I have opted for these generalized figures. Notably, these statistics are pre-Hurricane Mitch, which left up to 1/3 of Honduras's six million people homeless. Likewise, since the economy is largely based on agricultural exports, the economic infrastructure has been severely damaged. The difficulty of precise statistics is exacerbated by the precarious nature of inflation. For example, according to articles in the 17 July 2000 online edition of *Honduras This Week*, between January and June 2000 the cost of feeding a family of five (i.e. the average size family, not including extended family) rose 12.25 percent. Notably the cost of feeding a family of five is double the daily minimum wage. Likewise the minimum wage applies to the urban population (50% urban/50% rural) and according to United Nations statistics most Hondurans live on less than $1 per day.

[2] Tom Barry and Kent Norsworthy, *Honduras: A Country Guide* (Albuquerque: The Inter-Hemispheric Education Resource Center, 1999), p. 5.

[3] While Warner is the driving force, of the many people who have worked with La Fragua, a few stand out. Edy Barahona has been with the company since the beginning. For a long time he was one of the principal actors, but in recent years he has moved into more of a leadership role serving both as an administrator and as a director. From 1981-1994 Guillermo Fernández was the other lead actor. The core members of the current group include Rigoberto Fernández (started 1985), José Ramón "Chito" Inestroza (started 1986), and Yester Yasir "Yuma" Estrada Maldonado

(started 1997). The actors work full-time and receive a living wage. For the rural shows, typically no admission is charged, whereas in the four principal cities tickets currently run $1-$2. The result is that besides a Jesuit subsidy most of the funding comes from individuals (the 8,000 people on La Fragua's mailing list who receive their quarterly newsletter) as well some sizeable grant money from European religious charities. In recent years the summer "Season of Artistic Expression" has generated enough box office to nearly cover the expenses of the 6-8 week event.

[4] *¡Teatro!* , p. 51. Transcripts of interview of Jack Warner conducted for the documentary film *¡Teatro!:Theatre and the Spirit of Change in Honduras.* Produced by Ed Burke, Ruth Shapiro, and Pamela Yates. Interview transcripts from 1987 and 1988. Documentary released in 1989.

[5] The Goodman School of Drama is now the Theatre School of Depaul University.

[6] One of their first plays was an adaptation of El Teatro Campesino's *Los Dos Caras del Patroncito* (*The Two Faces of the Boss*), a work which remains a cornerstone of their repertory.

[7] *¡Teatro!*, pp. 26-27.

[8] For more information about these workshops as well as La Fragua's history through the early 1990s see my article "Forging a Honduran Identity: The People's Theatre of Teatro La Fragua" (*Latin American Theatre Review*, Fall 1994: 139-152). Elena M. De Costa's article "Nationhood-as-Community: Teatro La Fragua's Liberating Honduran Theatre for the People and by the People" (*Latin American Theatre Review*, Spring 1996: 111-130) looks at La Fragua's workshops and folk dramas in terms of how they involve the common people in revitalizing and re-evaluating Honduran culture. Deborah J. Cohen and Kenton V. Stone's article "Jack Warner and Teatro La Fragua: Popular Theatre in Honduras" (*The Drama Review*, Spring 1995: 75-92) provides an overview of La Fragua's work as well as an interview with Warner and excerpts from *Alta es la Noche* (*Advanced is the Night*) and *Sueño Nuevo* (*A New Dream*). My article "Honduras's Teatro La Fragua: The Many Faces of Political Theatre." (*The Drama Review*, Summer 2002: 47-65) traces the evolution of the company's theatrical expression in relation to the changes that have occurred in the socio-political climate in Central America in the last few decades.

[9] Their first version of Herod and the Three Wise Men was modeled on the Herod play from the Coventry cycle and the 12th century Spanish play *The Mystery Play of the Magi.* In this early version, part of the conceit was that the Three Wise Men speak in verse because as foreigners they should sound funny. The current La Fragua version remains indebted to the Spanish play, but opts for more stichomythic dialogue among the Wise Men.

[10] The written text has twenty scenes. Songs and dances, which can vary from year to year, are added both within scenes and as interludes. For 1999, the specific breakdown of the production text and the individual sources is as follows: Prologue (based on Prologue of John's gospel; the accompanying music is by Mozart); John the Baptist in the Desert (Luke 3:1-20); The Genealogy (Based on Matthew 1:1-17; music is a rap beat); Theophilus (Luke 1:1-4, with musical underscoring); Interlude of line dance and traditional Spanish *villancico* "Fum-Fum-Fum"; An Angel Announces the Birth of John The Baptist (Luke 1:5-25); Interlude of line dance and a traditional Spanish *villancico* that is roughly the Spanish equivalent of "O Come All Ye Faithful"; An Angel Announces the Birth of Jesus (Luke 1: 26-38); Interlude of line dance and a Peruvian *villancico*; Mary Visits Elizabeth (Luke 1: 39-56); The Birth of John the Baptist (Luke 1: 57-80 and includes "Sleep Little One", a Honduran lullaby); Joseph and the Angel (Matthew 1: 18-25); The Wise Men's Journey (Based on the Spanish *auto* and a standard Spanish *villancico* "Ya Viene La Vieja" or "Here Comes The Old Woman"); The Birth of Jesus Christ (Luke 2: 1-7; scene is accompanied by a ballet-like dance done to Kenny G's version of "Silent Night"); The Angels and The Shepherds (Luke 2: 8-20; also includes a rendition of "Glory to God in the Highest", the Argentinean song "Vengan Pastores" or "Come Shepherds" by Ariel Ramírez with an accompanying dance, as well as a dance done to "Arru, arru", a Chilean lullaby); The Wise Men and Herod (Based on the Spanish *auto*); The Wise Men's Worship (Based on the Spanish *auto* and "Llegaron Ya" or

"They have arrived" by Ariel Ramírez); The Escape to Egypt (Matthew 2: 13-15); "Green Roads" (Dance set to the Rubén Blades song "Caminos Verdes"); Herod's Speech (original); The Slaughter of the Innocents (Music and Latin text from *The Play of Herod* as well as text from Matthew 2: 16-18); The Escape, or Hurry Little Donkey (The song "Burrito Apura" by Ariel Ramírez); The Return to Nazareth (Matthew 2: 19-23); "The Bells of Bethlehem", a traditional Spanish *villancico.* The text stays close to the source material, but is told in story theatre fashion (mix of narrator and characters) and is augmented by music, dance, and movement. In 1999 the 34-page manuscript (which has neither stage directions nor dance notation, but which does include a partial listing of music) was the basis for a 68-minute show. In production, some short sections were cut while occasional lines were also added.

[11] As discussed in the ensuing text, the Noah and the Flood story is now expanded and performed on its own.

[12] *Navidad Nuestra*, p.1. All page citations are from a manuscript copy provided by Teatro La Fragua. Translations from Spanish for *Navidad Nuestra*, *La Historia de Noé*, and interviews with the actors are courtesy of Laurence Wensel, my graduate research assistant. I also gratefully acknowledge a Southwest Texas State University Faculty Research Enhancement Grant which provided funding for this project.

[13] Returning to the opening epigraph, their style is rooted more in pragmatics than ideology: "The choices are often simply a matter of trying to solve problems. What is the best available solution to a given problem? We work from there" (Warner, Interview with the author. El Progreso, Honduras, 19 December 1999).

[14] In many ways the term neo-medieval postmodernism reflects daily life in Honduras. It is a rather feudal economy as 50% of the arable land is owned by foreign companies. (Foreign capital controls 80% of the economy; the new industry is the *maquillas*, the garment sweatshops which are located in tax-free zones). Another 25% of the farmland is controlled by a handful of powerful ranchers. Even among locally owned tracts, only 20% of farms are worked by their owner. So most Hondurans work for the transnationals or landed elite or else try to scratch out a living on small tracts of semi-arable land. In turn, the culture is postmodern as the mix of images and sounds on the streets meld many different styles and influences. For example, street vendors sell posters and literally side by side one can see an image of Christ with a crown of thorns and one of Barney and Friends. Likewise, popular radio stations alternate U.S. rock/pop songs and Spanish-language artists. On TV, programming derives from a mixture of U.S. and Mexican sources. Notably, in all this one can only see or hear a very limited number of cultural/media expressions that are Honduran. Thus, part of La Fragua's importance is as an avenue for Hondurans to see fellow Hondurans engaged in the act of representation.

[15] In "Wise Men, Kings, and Actors" (*Jesuits: Yearbook of the Society of Jesus*, 1993, p. 102) Warner tells of a time when they were rehearsing this scene in a rural church when armed soldiers came to the town to collect their monthly bribe of cows and horses. When the soldiers entered the church, the actor directing the scene quickly called "cut" as he did not want to risk a confrontation. When the soldiers left and the scene resumed, the actor playing John the Baptist belted out his line with righteous anger. He understood the contemporary relevance of the 2,000 year old text. On the other hand, the anecdote highlights the fine line which La Fragua walks in terms of how much social criticism is permissible.

[16] While Honduras has not suffered the same degree of repression and violence as its Central American neighbors, there have been hundreds of disappearances and assassinations of political activists. Indeed Honduras bears the dubious distinction of being the only Latin American country ever convicted in a court of law for the crime of disappearance. While La Fragua typically avoids direct confrontation or overt agit-prop theatre, in the 1980s, the group did receive some opposition from the Honduran government/military. Actor Edy Barahona was kidnaped off the

street, beaten, and detained for four days. On a couple of occasions, the military surrounded the church in which they were performing, only to disperse without confrontation. Government informers have infiltrated the Gospel workshops in attempts to determine whether Communist propaganda was being proliferated through the theatre. However, at this point, Warner feels that the theatre is relatively safe because it has established enough of a reputation, both nationally and internationally, that the government does not want to create an incident which, due to Warner's status as an American priest, would attract unwanted international attention.

[17] I also saw this rap version of the genealogy performed by La Fragua as liturgical drama.

[18] Interview with the author. El Progreso, Honduras, 19 December 1999. Warner elaborates: "Rap has come into the shows in the last few years, but I had the idea from the beginning [1984], and had tried to get to it via break dancing. But the actors did not catch on till there was Spanish rap."

[19] Interview with the author. El Progreso, Honduras, 18 December 1999.

[20] Interview with the author. Olanchito, Honduras, 17 April 2000.

[21] Robert J. McClory, "Native Theater gives Hondurans lost pride," *National Catholic Reporter*, 13 August 1982. In terms of religion, Honduras is nominally 90% Roman Catholic. Though affiliated with the Catholic Church La Fragua has had members of Protestant sects as well as an atheist. The level of faith or religious involvement of the individual members varies considerably.

[22] The song, "Vengan Pastores" ("Come Shepherds"), is taken from an Argentine work called *Navidad Nuestra* by Ariel Ramírez.

[23] The song is about Colombian migrants crossing into Venezuela. Again, the Biblical story of a an innocent family fleeing the persecution of a repressive government has all too many parallels with contemporary Latin American politics. While the actors have not experienced such dislocation, as reported in the 15 June 1996 edition of *tlf news* they have conducted workshops with the children of El Salvador's guerilla organization FMLN. (The 23 years of La Fragua's newsletters are now available online: http://www.fragua.org)

[24] This speech was originally written in 1984, a period of strong political repression. Though ostensibly returning to a democracy in 1981, during the 1980s Honduras "became more like an armed camp and police state" (Barry and Norsworthy, 3). General Gustavo Alvarez seized the title of Commander in Chief and executed a Honduran National Security Doctrine. During his reign (1982-1984) he "presided over 214 political assassinations, 110 disappearances, and 1,947 illegal detentions" (28). After a brief respite from human rights violations, from 1986-1990 "a resurgence in both the frequency and intensity of abuses has approached the extreme levels experienced in the first years of the decade" (29). Notably, the face of repression was overt, not covert: "Leaflets plastered along busy thoroughfares announce the formation of new 'death squads' and list their intended victims among the country's civic leaders" (9).

[25] The play is from Fleury (France). In that text the passage is a dialogue between Herod and his son. The Pro Musica acting edition of *The Play of Herod* then repeats it as the marching song of the soldiers. The lines (59-74), in both English and Latin, can be found in *Medieval Drama* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975) edited by David Bevington. The main idea of the passage is that to protect their throne against this more powerful king, they must wage combat against the infant prince.

[26] None of the members of La Fragua lost their homes, but actor "Yuma" Estrada relates: "I used to live two hundred meters from the river and I saw the whole disaster and it was a torture to watch for all those that lived there. So for me, the play is very important and I think it is important for [Hondurans] to see it. Some of the audience cries, while others enjoy it" (Interview with the author. El Progreso, Honduras, 18 December 1999).

[27] *La Historia de Noé*, pp. 3-5. Manuscript copy provided by Teatro La Fragua.

[28] The Backstreet Boys reference was actually added by a performer one night during the 1999 show and thus far it has remained.

[29] All the music in *Noé*, particularly in the storm scene, is adapted from Benjamin Britten's *Noye's Fludde*.

[30] Interview with the author. El Progreso, Honduras, 16 December 1999.

[31] Warner downplays the distinction between La Fragua's religious and secular works, arguing that while the content is different, the artistic approach is the same. He has also stated: "To me the Gospels are great art. . . . They're also the most subversive document ever written." He goes on to say: "I've come to see that the concept of divine inspiration of the gospels and the concept of artistic inspiration aren't really that far apart. I believe very firmly that any writer, any artist, is reaching for something beyond himself, beyond our littleness. Art is always, in some way, touching deep spiritual questions of who we are, what is our place in the world and what does life mean. (Wm. Stage, "Teatro!", *Universitas* 15.4 Summer 1990: 13). More recently Warner adds: "This categorization of political versus non-political, religious versus secular is artificial. Everything is political, everything is religious. Look at Bach, is his music religious or is it just music?" (Interview, 19 December 1999).

[32] Their trilogy covers colonial times, Central American independence (1830s-1840s), and contemporary times. The trilogy consists of an adaptation of Colombian playwright Enrique Buenaventura's *Réquiem Por El Padre Las Casas*, La Fragua's own *Alta es la Noche* (*Advanced is the Night*), and *Romero de las Américas*, a work about the life and assassination of El Salvadoran Archbishop Romero. This latter work is a translation and adaptation, with the collaboration of the author, of Carlos Morton's *The Savior*. The first play focuses on Bartholomé de las Casas (1474-1566), an upper-class Spaniard who was initially a colonial slave owner but who then changed his views and became a priest who worked on behalf of the conquered natives. The middle play is largely based on the novel *Los Brujos de Ilamatepeque* (*The Sorcerers of Ilamatepeque*) by Honduran writer Ramón Amaya Amador, and it focuses on followers of Francisco Morazán, a native Honduran who fought for the independence and unification of Central America. Warner impact. The audience comes to recognize that the shows are about them, about their history" (Interview, 19 December 1999).

[33] The "Dramatization of Children's Stories" program tries to introduce students to the habit of reading. Notably, in 2000 and 2001 Warner conducted workshops on this children's stories program in Mexico City; subsequently, the National Theatre School in Mexico has adopted the program as their students are now doing these dramatizations in schools throughout Mexico City. The Children's Stories program is also a reaction against U.S.-produced mass media. Mostly relying on Latin American authors, "the dramatizations integrate traditional children's songs and games, which the globalized electronic media are relegating to oblivion" (Carlos Mario Castro, *tlf news*, December 2000).

[34] The children's videos tend to be animated, often Disney, movies. The adult movies have included an 8-week Stanley Kubrick festival, controversial religious movies such as *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *Jesus of Montreal*, as well as the gay-themed Cuban movie *Strawberries and Chocolate*. (Notably, in 1994 La Fragua hosted a Cuban production of the stage play *La Catedral del Helado* (*The Cathedral of Ice Cream*) upon which the movie is based.)

[35] The documentary was made for U.S. Public television in 1989, but continues to air intermittently on world-wide cable channels in six different languages.

[36] Notably, Warner sees the difficulty of social change as being rooted in U.S. economic domination: "The transnationals have such tremendous power, more power than any previous empire. Perhaps the best hope is via grassroots movements" (Interview, 19 December 1999).