

Nationhood-as-Community: Teatro La Fragua's Liberating Honduran Theatre for the People and by the People

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The theatre of the people never condescends.
Condescend to those who hold the keys to our salvation?
To those who are the nearest to God?
To those who are furthest from corruption?
To those who know how to endure?
To those who are eventually going to free us all?
To those with whom we hope to be One?

—Julian Beck

Theatre as Testimony, Theatre as Social Tool: The Role of Community Theatre

Expressions of identity by and for the popular classes are not, in themselves, anything new, since they have been a significant presence in Latin American theatre since pre-Columbian times. In its search for new forms of expression and more importantly, perhaps, new relations of production, the Honduran youth group Teatro La Fragua incorporates popular traditions as well as different currents of the modern theatre and of other cultural idioms in its productions. As professionals in community outreach programs, these theatre practitioners do not use the medium of community theatre just as a powerful conduit for messages of social involvement and subsequent change. In addition, the group also explores its own historical connection to the aboriginal cultures whose traditions, myths, and legends have almost vanished from the conscious mind or remained suppressed in much of Honduras. Teatro La Fragua's form of community theatre seeks to re-embodiment sociopolitical discourse through provocative inquiry in order to involve its spectator-participants in the unraveling of the performance text in community enterprise, personal response, and group interaction. Such performance art incorporates the perspective of both the performers in their power of social relations and the audience co-participants engaged in a discourse

enlivened by the thematic relevance and the stylistic directness of artistic form. With its emphasis on process and networking in combination with performance, this popular theatre group helps its audiences discover their own sense of self and, by extension, their own collective potential for social change as contributing participants in their community. The goal of Teatro La Fragua is to further the popularization of theatre, in the understanding that an instrument of culture is the expression of a country, insofar as it is part of the people's heritage.

Originating in a country that has scarcely a history of theatre, Teatro La Fragua seeks to generate hope, not despair or resignation, radiate communal transformation rather than passivity or selfishness. Further, this Honduran theatrical troupe, located in the small rural community of El Progreso, has as its goal the development of self and community with a strong focus on ancestral heritage. Each performance text becomes, in effect, an experience in the impact on interrogating discourse as it functions to evoke responses, both immediate and long-term, both verbal and action-oriented, both individual and community-centered from an engaged public. Theatrical adaptations from historical mythopoetic narratives deal with complex culture-based issues in a simplistic and subtly-framed fashion: *What are the traditions which have contributed to my ancestral heritage? To what extent have self-representations in "forgotten" histories, texts, memories, experiences, and community narratives been subordinated by master narratives and hegemonic discourse? How do political and cultural concerns such as race, class, gender, ethnicity, and nationalism intersect? How do lived experiences and social practices relate to the larger community within the context of power relationships? How is human possibility being diminished in my community? How can different histories, languages, experiences, and voices intermingle amid diverse relations of power and privilege? And how can my community or group speak from a position of enablement or empowerment, that is, from the discourse of dignity and governance?* The telling of traditional stories speaks to the historical specificity and voices of those who have been marginalized and silenced by recovering knowledge, histories, and experiences that have traditionally been left out of dominant accounts of everyday life and history. Theatrical expression in this instance is an attempt to rupture a politics of historical silence and theoretical erasure that serves to repress and marginalize the voices of the Other—the largely illiterate or semi-literate masses of rural Honduras.¹

Although founded in 1979 by a Jesuit priest, Father Jack Warner, Teatro La Fragua does *not* espouse an evangelical role of religious conversion to Catholicism even in its liturgical plays (the *Evangelio en Vivo—The Gospel: Live* series). While the theatre of the conquest was primarily an ideological vehicle used for proselytizing, Teatro La Fragua's biblical reenactments have a broader

social perspective. Through gospel dramatizations combined with a collaborative and interactive dramaturgical process, these theatre facilitators and their audiences investigate the correspondence between the events in their private lives and the more far-reaching concerns of social justice (i.e., moral development, political empowerment, personal transformation). Liturgical drama is one of several formats used to establish historical, cultural, and political contexts to make the populace more aware of the oppressive and coercive elements of their society and the means of pursuing emancipation from them. As we shall see, liturgical and folk theatre are used to elevate the populace as moral authorities and to legitimize the articulation of a public moral voice in the Honduran community. So it is that this theatre network functions to popularize culture by utilizing the participation of the populace as facilitators and creators in response to the need to revitalize and re-evaluate the indigenous cultural roots in Honduras. And in its repertory of national and international plays (ranging from the Argentinean Osvaldo Dragún's *Historias para ser contadas*, adaptations of pieces from Luis Valdez' *El Teatro Campesino*, Robert Bolt's children's plays, dramatized Mayan legends, or the classics such as Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*) Teatro La Fragua forces its mostly rural audiences to examine contemporary problems within a national context that concerns rights, justice, obligations, and liberties.

The members of the company are mainly Honduran youth recruited from the streets and the pool halls, as well as from the churches. Communal interaction typically encompasses formal presentations (performance), workshops (structured settings for professional development), and opportunities for informal contacts (non-structured networking, dialogue, and sharing of concerns and artistic subjects). All of the theatrical training is largely given from within the more experienced members of the troupe with occasional workshop sessions from visiting dramatic directors and actors, and, of course, the overseeing direction of Teatro La Fragua's founder and dramaturgical coordinator, Jack Warner, who trained at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago. The group represents what may be termed "liberation theatre"—a liberating experience to embrace one's indigenous cultural heritage outside of the context of the dominant culture and the ability to develop a discourse of possibility toward the hope of a more participatory role in the community and the wider society. As is the case with many small popular theatre groups recruited from the community, Teatro La Fragua makes use of a small group of actors with multiple roles as artists, teachers, organizers, and researchers. And, although its roots are in literature, Teatro La Fragua is not a literature-centered theatre, for much of the public to which it plays is illiterate. Combining the theatrical techniques of Jerzy Grotowski with the consciousness-raising pedagogy of Paulo Freire's literacy workshops, the goal of the workshop participants is to gradually and collectively rehearse together first in movement

improvisations in symbolic choreography, later adding dialogue, village life patterns, social relationships, history, and folklore. Masks and simple costumes might be created for allegorical characters, using found objects from around their environment—branches, leaves, tree barks painted with indigenous vegetable dyes—mixed with the more modern devices of cassette players and boom boxes for musical intermissions or dramatic effect. In this way, the workshop participants explore and rediscover a new, audio-visual language and vocabulary, through which they can tell stories of their daily struggles with nature, their fellow men, and society. During the improvisations, the theatre participants collaboratively compose a dramatic story that relates their experiences of exploitation and oppression on the local level, or simply the prideful recounting of stories related to their collective indigenous roots. Within this simple framework, however, the sketches that are thus created are more than mere dramatic complaints; they underline the necessity for cooperation as the only way to struggle free from the yoke of oppression as they express the people's deeply rooted desire for justice.

Teatro la Fragua: Theatre of Liberation and Education—Conscientizing Evangelization

Theology has to take its starting point from anthropology . . . a utopian and prophetic theology leads naturally to a cultural action for liberation, and hence to conscientization.—Paulo Freire, *A Letter to a Theology Student*

In recent years the Latin American Catholic Church has increasingly expressed its solidarity with the poor by recommending the spiritual development of the so-called *Basic Communities* (*comunidades de base*), grassroots people's organizations whose activities range from devout bible study groups to covers for guerrilla cells. In 1979 the bishops proclaimed "We affirm the need for a conversion on the part of the whole Church to a preferential option for the poor, an option aimed at their integral liberation" (Berryman 43-44).² As an expression of popular theatre rooted in the theology of liberation, Teatro La Fragua charges existing spaces (churches, streets, public squares or plazas and parks, open fields), temporarily transforming them into performance spaces, with the ideology of the emerging popular culture in Latin American society. And it is in these small groups within which biblical scenes are reenacted (as part of the liturgy or pure theatre in the open) for their relationship to the lives of the Honduran people themselves.

In the actual formative process of the Basic Communities, the pedagogical methods of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire figure prominently.³ Freire's

pedagogy is specifically designed for illiterate or semi-literate adults in the Third World and is radically opposed to Western concepts of education, which place the teacher in the role of an omniscient narrator, a dramaturge of sorts, paternalistically authoring, directing, and acting out in soliloquy what should be a mutual and continual pursuit of knowledge. Although Teatro La Fragua's ambitions as a theatre group do not extend to social revolution or even to the hope of any viable sweeping social change, the troupe does share in the strong commitment of the dissemination of a Christian humanism among the populace—a deep sense of self-worth, social values, ethics, and social justice.⁴ Perhaps more in the vein of the liberation theologian Juan Segundo, Jack Warner and his theatre collective draw from Paulo Freire his concept of *conscientizing evangelization*. In this form of "evangelization" the gospel is viewed as a liberating interpretation of history in which men and women are the subjects rather than the objects of historical events.⁵ It is not surprising, then, that the most successful theatre-related projects of this Honduran-based communal theatre have been the series of ongoing workshops or *talleres* in rural parishes in methods of dramatizing the Gospel entitled *¡El Evangelio en Vivo! —The Gospel: Live!*⁶ Since the theatrical experience is brought to the people within the framework of readily identifiable scenes from daily personal experiences or familiar reenactments of biblical scriptures, it is of little significance that there is a sixty-percent illiteracy rate among the populace and a high degree of immobility for largely peasant village populations. Although the audience tends to be less sophisticated intellectually than the Latin American public in national theatres in major cities, it is still important to achieve the goals of consciousness-raising and social activity without providing ready-made responses to complex community issues within the theatrical experience. Teatro La Fragua's plays become, in effect, prologues to real-life experiences shared mutually among the members of the acting troupe, who are also community members, and their public.

Theatrical prologues often serve as templates for both the performance text and its post-performance discussions. And so, the musical or narrative prologues to Teatro La Fragua's productions simultaneously offset and integrate the biblical play into the spectator's experience. The simplicity of scenic construction, actors' execution, performance text and performance space (usually a tent, church, or an outdoor area in a rural setting) is in sharp contrast to the complexity of the social context in which the performance text is framed. The suspension of time and the externalization of space which the performance text enjoys as part of a community novelty show, a celebration of sorts, does not diminish in any way the sense of urgency which forms the thematic concerns expressed therein. And it is once again the framework of interrogating discourse in pre-performance workshop encounters, post-performance fora, and within the performance text

itself which brings the audience to reflect upon the reality of its own situation (malnutrition, illiteracy, poverty, corruption). Familiar biblical verses are relived and reinterpreted in a contemporary setting—inspiring words of a historical past with thought-provoking significance for the present. Although the problems are admittedly too complex to solve by any theatrical effort, becoming aware of their existence, their root causes, and the beginnings of possible solutions at the grassroots level is one of Teatro La Fragua's main goals. This new focus on theatre seems to outdate the "rehearsals" for revolution and the popular collective theatre for social change of the 1960s and 1970s in Latin America by its more realistic goals and a deeper sensitivity to the very basic needs of the people, their limitations, and, most importantly, *their* outlook on circumstances and how *they* would like to see life remade by *their own* efforts. Where the colonial Church and state saw theatre as a vehicle by which the indigenous populations of Latin America could be manipulated unconsciously and converted to the Christian faith, this Jesuit priest interprets theatre to be a means by which the populace can begin consciously to manipulate *their own* lives. Since cultural poverty can be as devastating to a people as material deprivation, Warner asserts, "a people without an art form, a people without an expression is not a people...[our goal] is to forge a national identity by means of the people's own expression."⁷ And a national identity must come from the populace, emerging from *within* and not imposed from without. But such a process can prove to be a difficult one when the people have been taught to be ashamed of their heritage, and, over the years, have even lost much of their cultural identity to dominant cultural influences and the pressures of the contemporary, often Westernized, world.

Spectator Response: Ritual and Communal Forging of a National Identity—On Enacting Interrogating Discourse

Our goal is to forge a national identity by means of the people's own expression. —Jack Warner

In their attempt to emulate Augusto Boal's transferring to the masses the means of theatrical production as stated in his *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Teatro La Fragua would seem to have been given a more challenging task due to the basic lack of Honduran theatre history and the limited access to any educational facilities of its largely rural audiences. But by the very fact that their plays establish a transitive dialogue between theatre facilitators and spectator/participants, they are able to focus their work from a social to a more individual point of view as the violation of inalienable human rights is placed in the context of the daily life of each theatergoer on both a personal as well as communal

level. The numerous manifestations of interrogating discourse afford an *opening up* of the text and thus a peculiar liberty for actor and spectator alike. As Michael Chekhov points out, the Stanislavskian actor who merely delivers the lines of the author "makes himself a slave to the creation of others and his profession a borrowed one" (36). Through the use of interrogating discourse within the performance text and provocation to thinking and acting beyond it, the actor and his co-participating public manifest a common ability to create. What is performed is encoded, not as a script imposed by a single writer-director-scenographer nor even as words and actions devised collectively. The performance text becomes an encoded liberating experience, for the frames of discourse extend deep within the cultural constructs of both community and individual psyches. In a continuum of engaging discourse ranging from dialogic exchange to social intervention in community action groups, literacy and theatre workshops, and the revival of a knowledge of and pride in their Mayan heritage, Teatro La Fragua is exemplary of a trend toward a blurring between life and art in Latin America. Interrogating discourse, a chorus posed in frieze-like bas reliefs or set in lines surrounding the main action, kinetic-conceptual connections of choreographed movements—these are all dramatic techniques in and of themselves. Unless they are linked to real-life situations in the ongoing process of social awareness and social change, however, they remain mere smatterings of evidence of the diversity of performance events. In their attempt to identify with their respective community informants in varying degrees of human interaction, to discover and to act upon the histories of individuals, communities and culture, Teatro La Fragua and groups like it bring new meaning to dramatic art. In the interrogating discourse of the *Other* Jack Warner and his group have discovered that cultures are inevitably grounded in socio-historical, geopolitical, racial, and ethnic conditions which can either empower or enslave them. Rather than stage "rehearsals" for revolution as did Augusto Boal, Teatro La Fragua relives its past with both pride and pain, critically examines its present, and envisions a more hopeful future. Its interrogating discourse thus reflects three concerns: the *pedagogical* as a tool for learning (literacy and acting) and reflection via socio-drama techniques; the *cultural* as a platform for autochthonous forms to be included as key components of a national identity; and the *sociopolitical* as a forum for the marginalized to lend legitimacy to their voice within a repressed society.

Much in the vein of Boal's forum theatre and Freire's cultural literacy-theatre techniques for cultural workers in literacy workshops, Jack Warner's theatre *talleres* held in the small provincial setting of El Progreso are designed to further develop the techniques of the existing troupe members. These theatre workshops also train the novice so that he (there are rarely any women in the

group, perhaps for cultural as well as practical reasons), in turn, will set up theatre groups in his village or town. Once working on a theatrical production, emphasis is placed on comprehension of the text in its entirety, ways to organize and develop the piece discussed collaboratively, comprehension of the cultural context in which it will be set, and potential reactions of the public to the production. While looking polished, the performance text must maintain a certain degree of the spontaneous, demonstrating that it is in tune with its audience, otherwise the end result will more than likely be alienation and disinterest, even leading to a thinning out of the crowds from sheer boredom or the inability to relate to the actors and their production. Over the years of interaction with the country's people, Jack Warner has learned what themes and techniques receive most favorable audience response. This learning process has led him to adopt many of the dramaturgical practices of the medieval and pre-Columbian ritual theatres as well as the techniques of Paul Sills' story theatre, street theatre, Grotowski's "poor theatre," Brechtian epic theatre, popular collective theatre or "people's theatre," Augusto Boal's "theatre of the oppressed," as well as Paulo Freire's literacy training techniques. Narrative content, music and dance, rudimentary plots, staging and sound effects, monologues, dialogues, or colloquies to support dramatic action, and active involvement of both the audience and the performers can all be cited as dramatic elements in prehispanic religious rituals as well.

Theatrical Influences: The Convergence of Neo-Medieval Dramaturgical Practices with a Contemporary Liberation Theatre Perspective

A humanity reaffirmed through a traditional form and performed as a part of it, is the ultimate revolutionary demand. —Sylvia Wynter

The medieval theatre had long been something of an embarrassment to literary scholars, who viewed it as a crude and irrelevant interlude between the classical theatres of Greece and Rome and the mature flourishing of the Renaissance and Baroque theatres of England, Spain, and France. In the public mind it was often associated with a naive religiosity, primitive theatrical effects, and amateurish performance. Performance, however, is the key to the medieval theatre. A medieval dramatic piece was an event rather than a literary text, relegated far more closely to other events—political, social, military, diplomatic, religious, recreational—than to literature. It is musical chant, rhythmic bodily movement, and iconographic motif that link medieval theatre to practices and conventions in music, dance, and the visual arts. Indeed, the dramatic texts that have come down to us took their life from their performance in the context of a

civilization directed by religious and chivalric values and sustained by a robust urban and commercial life, a civilization remarkably rich in iconography, ceremony and pageantry, a civilization that over a thousand-year period had developed a multitude of institutions and activities fundamentally mimetic in nature. The medieval theatre was distinguished by a finite number of variations of theatrical form resulting from differences in motivation and local circumstance. Such categorizations were sometimes based on medieval class structure (folk drama and ceremony of "the people," street theatre and pageantry of the urban middle classes, entertainments and recreations of the aristocracy), or defined by the *raison d'être* behind the theatrical activity (religious and moral, recreational, commercial), or even classified in terms of the specific location of the performance (indoor, open-air, street).

It is in this context that the liturgical religious cycle plays and the folk dramas of Teatro La Fragua should be viewed. The plays that are not literarily based (unlike the adaptations of the classics performed for the more learned urban audiences or at least those who are literate) are our focus here. It is in these works, reenactments of Old and New Testament scenes and Mayan folk tales placed in a contemporary setting, that the original meaning of theatre as performed by traveling troupes for entertainment and educational purposes can best be appreciated. For Teatro La Fragua the performance text is a vehicle by which spectator participants and dramatic facilitators dialogue with one another on both individual and communal levels. The idea is to promote a sense of community sharing of both emotions and ideas projected toward a more empowering future, yet steeped in the cultural values and traditions of the past, for without a collective memory of their history a people cannot hope to envision a communal future of individual and common goals.

The earliest form of drama that can legitimately be considered the product of medieval culture is liturgical drama. It was originally designed to be performed within the Christian liturgy, chanted or sung in Latin by clerics before congregations of cloistered monks. The question of the relationship between ritual and drama, between the activities we perceive as liturgy and those we perceive as theatre is a vexed one. Informed as they were by liturgical and musical structures, the liturgical plays of the medieval era represent a specific form of music-drama operating with its own unique principles. Liturgical texts fostered dramatization, i.e., the combination of sacred texts and gestures led to performance. The result was the art of drama in its most primitive stages. The very nature of worship fosters performance, paralleling the idea that the Church's liturgy served as a legitimate safety valve for the dramatic impulse of the faithful in the period of the Church when theatrical ideas were frowned upon.

Jack Warner, aware of the drama-based roots of the Church's liturgy, the ritualized sensitivities of indigenous culture, and the popular origins of his intended Honduran audience, has developed a performance style characterized by an emphasis on music, dance, verse, and story theatre techniques. Modeled in large measure on the mytho-religious traditions of the indigenous Quichés, Teatro La Fragua is reminiscent of an earlier theatre of religious celebration, communal festivals, simple dramatizations of biblical passages rendered in dialogue, expressions of social protest, community education, and entertainment. In light of the "poor theatre" techniques identified by Jerzy Grotowski, Warner always keeps in focus his intended audience and the unique communicative ability of drama interspersed with the other performing arts: "When one is dealing with an illiterate audience, any language is a problem. [They are] not trained to be able to listen and pick up language, but everyone can respond immediately to dance. In the same way, music immediately communicates."⁸ This link between sacred and secular rituals and collective response in rhythmic form is also apparent in pre-Conquest dramatic forms. Georges Raynaud, who first translated the *Rabinal Achí* (the only extant script from indigenous times left by the Mayan culture) into French, has emphasized its religious aspects: "When song was no longer of an absolute use for common conversation, it remained, possibly in melopea format first, as a more or less poetic accessory to language and, above all, to the collective or individual's prayers, hymns dedicated to the gods. Dance as well (including in it, if at one time existed collectively, the simple unorganized agitation of various parts of the body), guided by musical sounds, consisted of social-religious creation. Dance in itself was a prayer, a hymn, the mimed expression of symbolic ideas; a collective form of an act, so ancient and so universal that it could be traced to animism itself: language spoken through gestures" (Monterde 129).

Reflecting a similarity with the *commedia dell'arte*,⁹ Teatro La Fragua combines this sense of pageantry and ceremony, ritual and the carnivalesque with deeply moving (emotionally) and inspiring (intellectually) theatre with a message. The message may be religious or humanistic, but it is always provocative. As was the case with the actors of the sixteenth-century *commedia*, the self-styled actors of the *Teatro* are imbued with a sense of theatricality to convey the pictorial qualities of drama, musicality through the singing and playing of instruments, choreography, and the sheer artistry of acting. And, like their earlier counterparts, they call upon all of these phenomena to win intuitive rapport with the audience. The *commedia*, in broad terms, embraced a totality of life and such is the aim of Jack Warner's theatre. In accord with the undulating rhythm of the *fiesta* spirit, the actors of Teatro La Fragua are more intent on entertaining than teaching, for they are aware that theatre can only inspire the processes of thought

on its deepest levels. Theatre can only awaken controversy in people at best; it cannot change their point of view. Thus, fragmented dramaturgy, visual imagery, vocal techniques, simple sound effects, and music are often employed to present aspects of events from different perspectives.

Teatro La Fragua's Religious Cycle Plays: ¡El Evangelio En Vivo!

. . . the Gospels are great art . . . they're also the most subversive document ever written. . . the concept of divine inspiration of the gospels and the concept of artistic inspiration aren't really that far apart . . . 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 this world and what does life mean. —Jack Warner

Jack Warner's gospel dramatizations of biblical texts recreate already familiar scenes using simple story theatre with one or several narrators-commentators reminiscent of Brechtian epic theatre. However, unlike Brecht, Teatro La Fragua chooses to focus on the action as opposed to the narration, as it replaces the static and distant quality of scripture verses with dramatic motion. But the dramatic action is a combination of graceful movement and powerful visual poses or freeze-frames of characters captured in moments of crisis, triumph, and degradation. Warner chooses a non-traditional setting for his cycle dramas—contemporary Honduran villages *en vivo*, bringing the scriptures *alive* with an air of the mundane. Since it is acutely aware that the living world does not reduce to image or language in many indigenous cultures, Teatro La Fragua focuses on the power not only of the word but also of the visual image. Indeed, in primarily oral cultures, the truths of the perceivable world can only be spoken of in fleeting images. Often in such cultural mind sets, the experience dies to itself as soon as it becomes word or image. The scriptures become more than words on a page, for they can be heard, seen, discussed, reinterpreted in real-life contexts and poignantly applied to the here and now toward the end of comprehending and perhaps altering one's destiny. Words are not just something spoken; they are also something to be done. But Jack Warner and his troupe are careful not to place themselves above the people in a seer position, but rather prefer to situate themselves *among* the people, learning from them as opposed to preaching to them. Rather than being an "opiate of the people," the dramatizations of the scriptures become a dynamic expression of the Brechtian impulse towards social action or at least social awareness. Those designated as *Other* are called to reclaim and remake their histories, voices, and visions as part of a wider struggle to change those material and social relations that deny

equality as the basis of democratic community. This is the message of the gospels and parables, one of enablement, *not* one of subjugation to hegemonic discourses and agendas—a profoundly social as opposed to a purely religious message. It is this contemporary context and cultural sensitivity that allow the cycle plays of Christ's birth, passion, death, and resurrection as well as the infancy narratives from Matthew and Luke to attain renewed meaning in the lives of the Honduran villagers to which Teatro La Fragua plays. The liturgical texts show that Jesus, too, suffered oppression but that his intent was not to subjugate his followers to a hypnotic scripture but to enliven them to a discourse of empowerment, critique, agency, democracy.

Teatro La Fragua's Folk Dramas¹⁰—Los cuentos hondureños: Voices of an Ancestral Heritage

. . . the actors felt a sense of their own roots . . . it was an experience where all of us together felt who we were and what we were doing. We felt this is our place, we do have a heritage, we do have something to express.
—Jack Warner

These works bring our people into direct contact with their past history, and we hope that they may serve as motivation and as instruments to construct a society more just and more democratic. —Edy Barahona, actor and director, Teatro la Fragua

On the surface indigenous legends, myths, stories may appear simplistic, but to someone who speaks the language and knows the culture they are rich in implication, hidden symbolism, and assumed knowledge. They trigger vast storehouses of cultural and natural information. Yet, it is within the context of cultural illiteracy rather than cultural awareness that Teatro La Fragua works in Honduras and its regional neighbors of similar native American descent. Having worked with local communities in Honduras for a number of years, Jack Warner is convinced that true cultural development occurs at a 'grassroots' level—the people themselves creating and inventing the type of future they want in their local region. And it is oral tradition that provides the working material (i.e., the forms, musical devices, formulaic patterns, and figurative language characteristic of folk speech) for this theatre practitioner and his acting troupe. The literary critic Jean Franco very early on in her career acknowledged this assessment of orality's significance to the literary domain when she stated "No study of Latin American literature, even in the twentieth century, is balanced unless the oral performance is taken into account and unless there is some notion of the

dialectics of oral and written literatures" (33). Indeed, the relationship between oral tradition and sociopolitical commitment of Third World dramatic facilitators is not coincidental because the commitment includes the desire to take the theatre away from the academic level and bring it back to the people, to their way of expressing their joys and sorrows, their human concerns. And, in a more important sense, Teatro La Fragua, and other contemporary Latin American community-oriented theatre groups like it, not only brings theatre to the intellectual level of the dispossessed masses, but physically brings its work to remote regions of the country where drama has never before been performed. And, once in their midst, theatre productions must take on the face of the people—their audience—such that the people *see themselves* (literally as actors and symbolically as characters) in the works. With borrowings from the *Populvuh* Mayan legend, and both traditional and contemporary folklore, plays like *Misión a la isla Vacabeza*, *El origen del maíz*, *Tío Coyote y Tío Conejo*, and *Los tres viajeros* attempt to reawaken the people's awareness of their historical roots at the same time that they mirror a contemporary and thus directly meaningful circumstance. These *Cuentos hondureños* are part of the dramatic repertoire of the troupe, representing a selection of particular stories which call the people to accountability. As dangerous memories of conflict, oppression and exclusion are recollected in dramatized form, such pieces call their audiences to join in awareness arousal first and foremost, and perhaps at the appropriate time in resistance and transformation of some sort. Dramatizations of Honduran and other Central American folk tales and short stories also focus on teaching Honduran youth cultural values contained in indigenous source material, thus maintaining the cultural heritage of a people who have been stripped of their cultural pride by centuries of foreign domination.¹¹ An impoverished cultural identity leads, ultimately, to a tolerance for both internal and external oppression socially, economically, and politically.

As Jack Warner has indicated time and again, theatre is connected to place. This American theatre practitioner who finds himself directing a semi-professional theatre group in Honduras has made the leap of transcultural translation by incorporating the Honduran people in a collaborative vision of what theatre should be for the Honduran peasant in particular. Language in all its complexity becomes central not only in the production of meaning and social identities but also as a constitutive condition for human agency—the political, the ethical, the economic, and the social modes of address. And so it is that Jack Warner has chosen a specific type of language to give life to his theatre productions—the language of pantomime, music, song, dance, verse. It is this "language spoken through gestures" or, more precisely, language as equivalent to gesture, gesture being the initial movement that motivates the act, that is the subject of Tzvetan

Todorov's semiotic study of the Conquest, *The Conquest of America*, in which he presents Spaniards and indigenous peoples in dialogue with one another—a dialogue he joins in an attempt to understand the mechanics of conquest, a machine that inexorably subdues the Other, the alien or, in this case, the culture. And so it is Jack Warner's intent to reinvigorate a sensitivity to Honduran cultural identity through the language of their ancestors combining bodily movement with static images, musical rhythms with poetic verse, narrators-actors-commentators with audience participants, single-role with multiple-role actors (Augusto Boal's *personajes comodines*), the histrionic with simple storytelling.

In the growth and transformation of its myths a society achieves its own sense of identity. Teatro La Fragua therefore returns to Mayan folklore to extract from it the very images that came to be associated with a great culture—fortitude, ingenuity, spirituality, self-confidence. The short pieces *Misión a la isla Vacabeza*, *El origen del maíz*, and *Tío coyote y Tío conejo* illustrate the reemergence of cultural heritage as a thematic concern of the troupe in its attempt to recapture the positive aspects of a lost past as a means of enriching and perhaps even transforming the present and the future for a dispossessed culture. Despite the simplicity in both theme and performance style, these works demonstrate a deep understanding of indigenous peoples in a role in which they are unaccustomed—audience to a performance text. A public unexposed to dramatic performance, needless to say, has special needs that must be met if the dramatized piece is to be successful. The entertainment value of the piece is just as important as its deep-seated message, for such audiences tend to have a low tolerance for verbiage without some measure of the pageantry of spectacle. In other words, they do not respond favorably to being preached to or to long drawn-out character development. Unaccustomed to the well-developed devices employed in contemporary set design, lighting, sound, technical effects, and musical backdrop, the untutored rural audiences to which Teatro La Fragua performs respond well to "stage effects" in their simplest forms—the haunting sound of a simple flute, the strumming of a guitar or the beating of a drum to indicate a scene change, the blaring of popular music from a boom box to set the backdrop for a modern-day break-dance routine, the invitation to participate in song, colorful costuming or a brightly colored tent for "stage" exits and entrances, and some measure of improvisation in creating or reacting to audience response. In experiencing these theatrical performances, one is reminded of the more entertaining side of popular theatre and its influences from the clown figure, the street vendor, the minstrel or troubadour. In some ways, Teatro La Fragua's performances seem like children's theatre for adults open to varying levels of interpretation, although the troupe usually plays to audiences of diverse age groups. Audience involvement to some degree is, indeed, important for the rural

Honduran who is not sensitized to any specific role that an audience is expected to play in respect to theatrical performances—active or passive. In many instances, it is the first exposure that the populace has to theatre and, as such, people tend to respond with the exuberance, curiosity and spontaneity that is expected of novice spectators. After the initial novelty of the performance fades, they are more likely to respond as active participants to some aspect of the performance than a more seasoned Western audience. And this is just the type of reaction that the actors wish to elicit from their public.

Misión a la isla Vacabeza (1982) takes the knight of Robert Bolt's children's play, *The Thwarting of Baron Boligrew*, and transforms him into Ixbalanque, the warrior-hero of the *Popul vuh*, set in the colonial period of the Spanish empire. Some spectators interpret the dragons who battle against the mythical hero as multinational corporations (such as the United Fruit Company which controlled the region for many years), government officials, powerful landowners. The triumph of the Mayan hero over these forces is a metaphor for the people's contemporary struggle for political, social, and economic empowerment. By incorporating live music and song (reminiscent of Julio Iglesias' popular song rendition of Federico García Lorca's poem "Caminante" who makes his own path by walking the road in life which he alone chooses), the play closes on a hopeful, upbeat note. Similarly, *El origen del maíz* is based on the Mayan legend of the origins of corn as the god and keeper of corn, Nompuinapu'u, enters into a sung-dialogue with an old man on the harvesting of his cornfield. Indeed, it is in this piece that Warner's troupe underscores the communicative effectiveness of pantomime, dance, and freeze frames of dancers in aborted motion, as in a painting or photograph. Motion and live musical effects, mainly through the harmonious notes of a flute, communicate plot and emotional impact more so than dialogue in keeping with the oral tradition from which the legend stems. Its lengthy interlude features the Old Man dancing through the first human planting and harvesting of corn with ballet-like gracefulness. Mindful of the importance of entertainment value, the troupe adds comic relief with the imitation of a rooster. The passage of time from the planting of the crop to its harvesting is indicated by the crow of the rooster coupled with the musical chiming of a triangle and the ever-present narrators who recount at least a portion of the story with single-line commentaries. The play's theme centers on the division of labor between man and woman—man planting and harvesting the crop and woman preparing tortillas from corn meal—and everyone working together with proper farm implements in a communal enterprise to maximize the gift of food from the gods. The precision and artistry of each bodily movement in this performance text captures the simple beauty of legend as well as the majesty of the interaction between gods and men. The

performance of *El origen del maíz* is indeed a tribute to Mayan dignity which the theatre hopes to restore in its modern-day ancestors.

Finally the piece entitled *Tío Coyote y Tío Conejo* is a fable based on Central American folklore. As in many of the story dramas performed by Teatro La Fragua, action and dialogue are supplemented with song, narrators and choral affirmation. It is within the verse-sung praise to the land by the proud, old peasant landowner that the performers convey the play's moral:

Esta es mi huerta, una maravilla;
la más bonita de toda la vida.
Esta es la huerta más hermosa,
esta es mi huerta maravillosa.

The idea of holding the land in high esteem and the value of working the land for the peasant is underscored in this fable of hard work rewarded and the ability of the farmworker to outsmart the cunning, thieving coyote and thus attain the blessing of the bishop. Again, within the context of a primary oral or illiterate audience, Jack Warner finds it necessary to recreate his story in mnemonic patterns, shaped for ready oral recurrence in order to effectively solve the problem of communicating carefully articulated thought. Thus, thought must come into being in heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns, in epithetic or other formulaic expressions, in familiar thematic settings (the fields, the parish church, the ritual duel, and so on) in repeated proverb format. Rhythm, whether in formal verse or not, aids recall, even physiologically. And comic relief in the form of a quick-witted play on words assists in maintaining audience attention to the performance text, as this opening exchange between narrators and the Old Man demonstrates:

Narrador 1: Allí encontraba uno de todo: rabanitos.

Viejito: Rabanitos, qué bonitos.

Narrador 2: Culantro.

Viejito: Culantro, qué encanto.

Narrador 1: Tomates.

Viejito: Tomates, qué elegantes.

Narrador 2: Pipiyanes.

Viejito: Pipiyanes, qué galanes.

Narrador 1: Berenjena.

Viejito: Berenjena, qué melena.

Narrador 2: Zanahorias.

Viejito: Zanahorias, para doña Gloria.

Narrador 1: Lechugas.

Viejito: Lechuga, pero qué pechuga.

Narrador 2: Y sobre todo, sandías.

Viejito: Sandías.

Narradores: Sandías grandes de tierra negra.

Liberation Theology and Liberation Theatre: Latin America's Theatre of the Vox Populi

Our work, I imagine, must be, let's say, like a bambuco that comes from the people and returns whole to the people. —Arnoldo Palacios

The recent trend in Latin American liberation theatre, of which Teatro La Fragua is but one example, allows the language of theatre to become once again testimony to the creativity of the public domain and transformed there by collective practice. The dramatic facilitator and his troupe of actors find themselves embedded in and responsive to a public demand— witnesses and bearers of a collective voice. Private pain is rehearsed in the public arena in a language of collective experience. And any set canon restrictions on the production of both the dramatic text and the performance text are dispensed with, allowing all discourses and areas of knowledge and media of communication to be embraced. The prevailing note of liberation theatre, as Jack Warner attests in reference to his gospel cycle and folkloric plays, is that it is subversive, for it asserts the existence of a collective memory of which the dramatic pieces are fragments. And it is in this sense of public production and private assimilation of this liberating theatre that a meeting of minds and a reconstruction of histories occurs. In short, a public world is reconstructed in the dense and private imagery of drama, poetry, song, dance, and dialogic exchange. The performance text of this theatrical form is increasingly the site of a rehearsal of new relationships, new possibilities, new forms of struggle in conjunction with already established cultural traditions and often, at its best, it is a moving exhortation to find the self in the reconstruction of society. Far from celebrating the assimilation of Latin American society into a metropolitan culture and history, finding easy refuge in a mythical past, or rehearsing for an untenable grassroots revolutionary movement, liberation theatre of the strain we have been discussing has chosen another direction. It has simply focused on the possibilities for self and social empowerment through its roots in local experience and dialogue with the "ordinary" discourses of popular culture and tradition. Firmly rooted in the philosophy of liberation theology, liberation theatre links learning and social justice with the daily institutional and cultural traditions of society and reshapes them in the process. It views identity not only as a historical and social

construction, but also as part of a continual process of transformation and change in a holistic sense—spiritually, psychologically, socially.

Teatro La Fragua's cycle plays, *El Evangelio en vivo* and *Cuentos hondureños*, represent a rediscovery of a collective voice and a collective experience found at times in popular traditions and popular culture, at times in shared ritual or song, at times in folk memory. Teatro La Fragua is an active force in retrieving or reconstructing those elements of national culture that help validate the emerging consensus or strengthen the identity and consciousness of nationalism, ethnicity, and class of the marginalized and the dispossessed in Honduras today. In this dramatic realm of popular theatre, even the most private experience is offered in a form of democratic speech, and the withdrawal into hermetic privacy remains an uncharacteristic response. In this way, the performance text becomes public remembrance as well as personal testimony. Regardless of their diverse styles and goals, a single endeavor unifies the New Popular Theatre movement in Latin America: the awakening of a critical consciousness in the dramatic recipient as the first step toward transformative action. It is the self-proclaimed role of groups like Teatro La Fragua to validate the adoption of parodies of well-known works, the scriptures in contemporary settings, and collective creations based on oral storytelling traditions of folklore and historical or current events as thematic enterprises of the contemporary popular theatre movement. Religious and secular theatre festivals play a central role, as they did traditionally, in the ritual restatement of cultural identity. The performance text or spectacle is thus placed in the service of the needs and concerns of the people: the preservation of historical identity, the renewal of myths and legends as cultural models, and the rooting of the popular struggle in a broader perspective, such as that which myth and history can offer. Teatro La Fragua views theatre as *process*—a process of retrieval, validation or recodification, celebration, and dissemination of national culture. And it is the *vox populi*, the rural and urban poor, who bring to the performance text their present sociopolitical situation, ever mindful of their *intrahistoria*—their cultural indigenous heritage.

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Notes

1. The population of Honduras is 90% mestizo. Hondurans are of mixed Mayan and Spanish descent. Despite several literacy campaigns and compulsory education for a period of six years, there remains a 68% literacy rate with attendance of 70% overall, but less than 16% at the junior high level according to recent government figures. One of the aims of the Teatro La Fragua workshops is to

increase the literacy level of the rural populace by reading the scriptures and reenacting their message within a contemporary and culturally meaningful context. *The Third World Guide 93/94* (Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia: Instituto de Tercer Mundo).

2. In referring specifically to the basic or base communities that arose out of the mandates from these two plenary sessions of the bishops of the Catholic Church—communities similar to those within which Teatro La Fragua works in Honduras—Berryman notes, "the social and political impact of base communities may be viewed in terms of (1) initial consciousness-raising, (2) the vision of life and motivation for involvement, (3) the sense of community and mutual aid they generate, (4) the experience of grass-roots democracy, (5) the direct actions they engage in, and (6) directly political action." (72-73).

3. On a number of occasions Paulo Freire has made reference to the basic Christian communities in Brazil. He contends that "when popular groups assume the role of subjects in studying the Gospels, which they no longer simply read, then they inevitably study them from the standpoint of the oppressed and no longer from that of the oppressor." (Freire and Faundez 66). The popularization of Freire's *conscientization* in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* formed the basis of his literacy methods, grass-roots theatre (as practiced by Augusto Boal), and techniques of community organization.

4. Gustavo Gutiérrez, one of the leading liberation theologians, defines liberation as the expression of the oppressed people's aspirations, "emphasizing the conflictual aspects of the economic, social and political process which puts them at odds with wealthy nations and oppressive classes." He qualifies this definition further by stating that "the gradual conquest of true freedom leads to the creation of a new man and a qualitatively different society." In this process, in this development towards liberation, theatre can play a key role (Gutiérrez, 36-37).

5. Of the connection between literacy training and evangelization Segundo writes: "An evangelization committed to man's liberation is deeply tied up with the new form of literacy training, i.e., one incorporated within a process of consciousness-raising. This new form of literacy training, as a process of liberation, possesses an educational technique in the service of man that is completely similar to those of the evangelization process. We should not even think of two different processes but of one single moment for the gradual liberation of man within which is included evangelization." (Segundo, 174-175).

6. Teatro La Fragua has offered theatre workshops in Belize and Nicaragua, and has made at least two tours in the United States. The local actors it has trained in the villages continue to dramatize the Gospels, often developing their own dramatic techniques and approaches to biblical and other dramatized texts. In Honduras a single "parish" usually encompasses a large area with as many as one hundred villages or more. On Sunday, the combined groups put on a full sequence of dramatized biblical stories, gleaned from both Old and New Testaments, learned during the workshop sessions. Villagers from several areas join together for these "traveling guest" performances to visit a church of a town within their parish. For an in-depth historical perspective on Teatro La Fragua, refer to John Fleming's article "Forging a Honduran Identity: The People's Theatre of Teatro La Fragua" (*Latin American Theatre Review*, 28/1 (Fall 1994): 139-152).

7. *Teatro!* (documentary film) Transcripts of interview conducted for *Teatro! Theatre and the Spirit of Change in Honduras*. Produced by Ed Burke, Ruth Shapiro, and Pamela Yates. Interview transcripts 1987, 51. This documentary film on the theatre troupe won a silver Hugo at the Chicago Film Festival in 1989 and, in 1990, was seen on public television in the United States, bringing the group's work to English-speaking audiences. In the wake of the film's success have come two brief tours of the United States by the troupe, in the summers of 1990 and 1991, with performances in St. Louis, Kansas City, Denver and El Paso.

8. *Teatro!* (documentary film) Transcripts of interview conducted for *Teatro! Theatre and the Spirit of Change in Honduras* 24.

9. The *commedia dell'arte* was a genre created and sustained by actors and not by authors. The actors, through daily experience of their performance, learned *what* would stimulate their audience. How they achieved this stimulation was their art. The farce or *paso* happily embraced the chaotic aspects of life and presented only slices of it in a single act. It relied on gesticulation to convey its individualism and realistic world. It is this latter aspect which is reflected in the one-act or short tableau dramas of Teatro La Fragua. Although there is often a definitive dénouement in each piece, the theme of the dramatic vignette is designed to spark reflection and discussion as well as to entertain its audiences.

10. Folk drama typically designates a variety of dramatic presentations which have several common features: performance by amateur actors; a traditional action repeated yearly or as often as the play is performed; a lack of representational realism; presentation in connection with a seasonal festival, often as part of a series of house-to-house visits. Its power to create community cohesiveness is perhaps the most recognizable aspect of this traditional dramatic form—an element that is not lost to the popular theatre groups in Latin America.

11. Aside from the Spanish occupation of Honduras (1498-1821), efforts at a viable independence were thwarted both by Great Britain and, more consistently, the United States. Due to the extent of foreign domination and lacking the palpable, living heritage of Guatemala and Mexico, Honduras has become a country without an identity in many ways. For example, Honduras produces little in the way of folk crafts and prefers a hodgepodge of popular music from other countries rather than its own strain—*merengues* from the Dominican Republic, *rancheras* from Mexico, and popular American disco hits from the 1970s.

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