

Teatro la Fragua: The Impact of 25 Years

Deb Cohen

Professionalism. That's what 25 years of continuous activity produces. As Teatro la Fragua completed its silver anniversary (officially 19 July 2004), local and national Honduran cable television channels devoted several hours of programming to interviewing Warner and the actors. The same day, in addition to theatrical performances and a celebratory mass (director Jack Warner is a Jesuit priest), the regular business of the theatre continued. As girls arrived for their regular afternoon ballet classes, actors fanned out over Progreso armed with flyers and advance tickets for two upcoming shows: *Atrapados en azul*, an artistic collective of young men and women who write and perform their own poetry and music; and a concert by Guillermo Anderson, a local musician who embraces environmentalism and indigenous (garífuna) culture. That an audience exists for these programs shows how far Progreso has come since 1980, when Warner first moved the fledgling theatre group there from Olanchito. In the intervening years, those remaining from the first generations of la Fragua actors (Edy Barahona, Ramón "Moncho" Bardales, José Ramón "Chito" Inestroza, Rigoberto Fernández and Edilberto González) have moved into positions of leadership and responsibility both artistically and in the group's administration. Meanwhile, fresh talent continues to emerge from the acting *talleres* given to neighborhood school and church groups as well as from the ballet classes.

Teatro la Fragua's twentieth anniversary passed very differently, coming as it did in the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch with the nation still reconstructing basic services. However, from that disaster grew "Emergency Theatre" – workshops created by the group for the victims living in shelters as a means of both passing the time and creating an environment in which they could express and process their experience. Those workshops now form a group of set pieces, the "Cuentos infantiles," which have become a



Ramón "Chito" Inestroza directs a weekend workshop on the grounds outside teatro la fragua.

strong part of TLF's repertory. In addition to a lively Spanish rendition of Dr. Seuss's *Green Eggs and Ham*, the cuentos include "El niño que buscaba ayer," a parable about appreciating what one has in the present as opposed to seeking a perceived "perfect" past. As always, music, sound effects and lively movements and dance steps accompany all TLF performances. For that reason, as well as due to advances in technology unanticipated in past plans to publish the complete works of TLF, Warner now plans to create a CD-ROM or DVD that will contain all scripts in both Spanish and English. The digitized format will include still photos, video clips, midi files of the music, and other goodies.

Twenty-five years of continuous existence – of temporadas and tours, of film series and ballet classes, of talleres and teatro. What kind of impact can such longevity and activity bring to the surrounding area? Twenty-five years means that the teenagers and young adults of El Progreso have grown up with Teatro la Fragua as an accepted and natural part of their cultural milieu. As an example, Warner observes that a large number of Progreso's

current television and radio reporters participated in TLF's workshops as children. Héctor Flores, the boy who shyly stood up and told a ghost story in the 1988 film, now forms part of the artists' group *Atrapados en azul* and regularly writes poetry as a form of self-expression. The theatre has served as a training ground for young Jesuits interested in bringing the Gospels to life through theatrical techniques "forged" in Honduras. Actors, dancers, experts in stage combat and other artists have visited Teatro la Fragua from Italy, Norway, Cuba, Spain, the US and elsewhere, resulting in a rich cultural exchange that often is the fodder for the TLF newsletter. Jack Warner and his work with Teatro la Fragua has been the subject of several academic articles; yet with all the legitimacy this confers to his activities, he does not have time to write proposals for grants or other funding – he is too busy *doing* theatre. In an age where theatre and literature professionals frequently subjugate textual analysis to the predominant literary and cultural theories, Warner (whose MFA in theatre implies knowledge of said theories) eschews formal theoretical approaches, embracing only "what works" for his public.



Atrapados en azul

Can Teatro la Fragua survive the eventual departure of Jack Warner? Can it survive, period? When I asked Warner this question in 1998, he seemed unsure yet hopeful, for he had begun to lay the foundation of what I see around me today – Edy Barahona booking shows from the front office and directing them in the theatre; Moncho Bardales in charge of publicity; Edilberto González composing music and programming it into the computer that runs the synthesizer; Rigoberto Fernández and Chito Inestroza showing the younger actors the TLF ropes; the younger actors bringing their own energy and new moves to the company. And honestly, if Warner hadn't just told me that he was not sure how he was going to meet the next payroll, I would be inclined to answer the above questions with a (qualified) "yes." Those of us who have spent time with la Fragua will testify (or have testified in one of their newsletters) about how working with the group has affected us in a way that cannot be fully explained by intellectual theories or defined by entries in our curriculum vitae. Working closely with TLF creates an immersion effect, in which the visitor truly becomes part of something artistic that looks to change its environment for the better, not only in terms of the practical (box office draw, economic self-sufficiency) but also in terms of the long-term cultural impact it can have on its public and its community at large.

Slippery Rock University
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