

## Popular Theatre and the Guatemalan Peace Process

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Masacre del ochenta y dos, nunca la vamos a olvidar; porque en ella murieron muchos de nuestros seres queridos. Toda la historia completa hoy se lo venimos a contar.

Thus sing the children of Santa María Tzejá, one of hundreds of Guatemalan highland villages destroyed by the scorched earth campaign of the early 1980s.<sup>1</sup> They enter the stage with this opening song, following an incense bearer and carrying flowers to honor their dead. Placing the flowers on the floor, they pause, as 15-year-old Adelina Chom announces the title of the play: “There is nothing hidden that will not be revealed....”<sup>2</sup> Fourteen years after their parents fled from “la Violencia,” these children first performed for their own community and later took the stage before other indigenous communities, audiences in Guatemala City, international observers and even the military as they traveled around Guatemala to tell their story. Their experiences, and those of their community Santa María Tzejá, hold many important lessons concerning the role of cultural production in the process of peace and reconciliation in Guatemala’s post-war era.

The mid-1990s witnessed a historic era of transition for all of Guatemala and the experience of the community of Santa María Tzejá is an important microcosm of the issues that affect many Guatemalan citizens at the national level. It is located in the heart of the Ixcán region, one of the regions most affected by the violence and stigmatized as guerrilla territory. In addition to being split practically in half between those who fled to Mexico and those who remained under military control, the community was the site

of one of the first collective organized returns of refugees following the 1992 agreement between the Guatemalan government and representatives of the refugee population.<sup>3</sup> The continued effects of repressed memories were complicated by the social and political divisions created by over a decade of diverse experiences of violence, repression and refuge, but these tensions were dealt with through non-violent means leading to a positive process of reconciliation and development. The play that I will discuss in this article is but one element of this complex process.

The experience of Santa María Tzejá illustrates a process of reintegration and revitalization of communities once fragmented by the scorched earth campaign. By connecting diverse individual experiences to the collective struggle for survival and social transformation, the performance of *No hay cosa oculta que no venga a descubrirse* provides a sense of continuity of experience that crosses cultural, generational and experiential lines of division. This process did not remain an isolated community endeavor, but appropriated numerous public spaces formerly controlled by the political military apparatus of authoritarianism converting them into spaces of performance and forums for the discussion of individual experience and collective human rights. Such grassroots efforts at social transformation may indicate an emerging strategy for approaching the multiple tensions of Guatemalan society. This is a story not only about a community's efforts at revitalization, but a country's efforts at reconciliation and reform in the face of centuries of violence and oppression.

The origins of theatre and performance in Latin America lie, of course, in the Pre-Colombian cultures of the continent. Traditionally, a key function of theatre was to maintain the unity of a community through the affirmation of values and moral reassurance (Weiss, 1993 22-23). In this way, theatre is understood more as a mechanism of social stability and control than as a vehicle for social or political transformation. This tradition was carried on during the period of the Spanish conquest as well as throughout the nineteenth-century efforts at the development of national cultures. Although there are several works from this era that served as an outlet for criticism of authority, such as the popular *Güegüense* in Nicaragua,<sup>4</sup> it was not until the twentieth-century that an organized movement to transform the nature of Latin American theatre emerged.<sup>5</sup>

The influence of Bertolt Brecht in Latin America is undeniable, and by the time of his death in 1956 his work was being staged in many major Latin American cities and his theories were widely available in translation.

Brecht summarizes his approach through his description of “epic theatre” as a theatre that appeals more to people’s reason than to their emotions. The function of theatre in this sense was no longer to provoke emotions and provide entertainment through empathy and catharsis, but rather to arouse the spectators’ capacity to action through a greater understanding of the conditions that influence their lives. Brechtian theatre presents its audience with the need to make decisions, to recognize the conditions of its existence as alterable and to become part of a “powerful movement in society which is interested to see vital questions freely aired with a view to their solution” (Brecht 76). Such notions of theatre are clearly influential in the work of artists such as Enrique Buenaventura and Augusto Boal who, in addition to being well-known playwrights, were instrumental in developing a theory of Latin American popular theatre.

Enrique Buenaventura’s well-documented work with the Experimental Theatre of Cali in Colombia broke with the traditional hierarchical structure of the theatre through the collective creation and production of its plays. Founded in 1955, the group considered theatre more as a form of communication than of entertainment. The entire process of creation and performance was a collective venture that included discourse and analysis of the text, improvisation and interaction throughout the performance and post-performance discussions and confrontations with the audience known as *foros*. Buenaventura’s theatre aspired “to contribute to the creation – in both actor and spectator – of a new critical and active consciousness: to modify both consciousness and conduct and thus allow them to finish in real life the unfinished dramatic performance” (Fuentes 347).

Augusto Boal also based his theory of the theatre on a critique of Aristotle’s notion of catharsis by describing its function as a “purifier of the citizen,” one which purges the audience of ideas or tendencies capable of modifying society (Boal, *Theatre* 56). In opposition to this tendency, he promoted theatre as a rehearsal for action, a way to give agency to the spectator by increasing his capacity to act rather than producing solace and equilibrium through a quiet catharsis. Boal describes several different means by which this goal can be accomplished in his *Theatre of the Oppressed*, all of which involve a collective and didactic effort at including the spectators in the theatrical experience and allowing them to intervene in the creative process of expression (Boal, *Teatro* 126-32). This idea of returning the theatre to the people was a widely accepted notion throughout Latin America by the 1970s

and one that certainly influenced the rise of grassroots and amateur theatre across the continent. There are several such theatre groups whose efforts should be examined more closely, albeit briefly, to gain a better understanding of their common characteristics, but I will limit my discussion here to just three such groups: Grupo Teatro Escambray in Cuba, Nicaraguan popular theatre and the Movement of Campesino Artistic and Theatrical Expression (MECATE), and Teatro Vivo in Guatemala.

A professional theatre troupe from Havana founded the Grupo Teatro Escambray (GTE) in Cuba in 1968. The region of Escambray was one of the more isolated and excluded regions of the country before the revolution, but also one of the regions that suffered the most during the violent years of guerrilla fighting and counter-revolution. The lasting effects of these historical circumstances underlie the rationale for the decision by the GTE to develop theatre in the region as a means of collective discussion and confrontation with the problems of the people. The entire theatre group moved to the region and familiarized itself with the issues that people faced there in order to develop a theatrical repertoire appropriate for their audiences (Corrieri, 363-69). They then reached out to people in diverse communities in the region and allowed them to participate in the organization, discussion and evolution of the theatre. According to Sergio Corrieri, director of the GTE, "discussion and debate are not an addendum that can happen or not.... [They are] intimately tied to the structure of the work; for this reason, the theatrical performance can not take place without the participation of the public" (367). Through this process of performance and discussion, the efforts of the Grupo Teatro Escambray produced a cultural forum for the public clarification and collective communication of issues that were essential to reconciliation and development in the region.

The spread of popular theatre in Nicaragua took a different course than the process described in Cuba. Many theatre groups grew spontaneously out of education and organizing activities under the Somoza dictatorship and the oppositional guerrillas frequently employed theatre to raise awareness of peasants and rural workers. After the fall of the Somoza dictatorship, these widespread efforts provided an established base for the further development of a popular theatre that is described as a "theatre of testimony" (Morton 89-92). The scripts were mainly improvised from the daily experiences of the groups, the direction mainly collective and most of the actors received no formal training.<sup>6</sup> Despite the differences in its formation and development, the goal of this collective movement, as in Cuba and other Latin American

countries, was to facilitate people's capacity for self-expression as a means of re-establishing their identity and self-confidence after many years of repression and violence (Kidd 190-201). The focus was much less on the aesthetic than on education and empowerment, conflict resolution, leadership training and the affirmation of popular traditions and national culture.

International theatre festivals such as the Manizales Festival in Colombia begun in 1968 and the 1974 Chicano and Latin American Theatre Festival in Mexico also provided popular theatre groups with a network of support and generated opportunities for the free exchange of ideas and criticism (Shank 213-33). The similar socio-political conditions of many Latin American societies made such events an invaluable source of interaction for theatre groups across the continent. Both Cuba and Nicaragua held annual theatre workshops throughout the 1980s, out of which developed the Latin American Theatre School under the direction of Osvaldo Dragún. Such gatherings are widely recognized as the impetus behind the vibrancy of the popular theatre movement throughout the 1970s and 1980s and the ever-greater number of groups involved in similar efforts (Weiss, *Latin American* 177-82).

The efforts of one such group in Guatemala in the late 1970s, Teatro Vivo, did not go unnoticed by the authorities of the military repression there. Teatro Vivo worked in the rural communities near Guatemala City and eventually, through their contacts with a Christian organization running literacy groups in the area, established itself in an area still undisturbed by the violence. Just as the other groups mentioned above, Teatro Vivo developed a didactic theatre in which community members could participate and learn how to use performance as a means of expressing and communicating their reality. The successful progress of the group would be short-lived, however, due to the increasing surveillance and repression of theatre groups by the Guatemalan authorities in 1980. Eventually the group was forced into exile in Mexico following direct threats to its members, but one member recalls that "our most profound sense of joy came from the fact that the days we had not come to town, the groups had continued practicing on their own.... We are confident that the people discovered their own creative potential in the short time we were able to carry out the program" ("Teatro Vivo" 4).

The evolution of popular theatre throughout the latter half of the twentieth century moved steadily away from entertainment toward efforts at self-expression and consciousness raising. Such notions as catharsis and resolution were rejected and replaced by the need for critical examinations

of social and political conditions and calls for action and change. In the midst of widespread national liberation movements and revolutionary efforts at socio-political transformation, theatre took on an ever-greater reactionary role as a means of exposing and fighting the inequities and injustices of Latin American societies.

The play *No hay cosa oculta que no venga a descubrirse*, which I will examine here, appears to step out of the traditionally confrontational role of popular theatre. It is not a return to the Aristotelian idea of catharsis as empathy and an eventual purging and stasis. In fact, the style of theatre described here builds on the ideas of collective creation and performance as a call to action at both the personal and the social level, but there is also a clear need for catharsis and resolution as a step toward such action. Due to the nature of the content of the play and its basis in the traumatic events of the war-torn Guatemalan highlands, there is a heightened need for such cathartic resolution. The emotional arousal created in audience members through identification with the theatrical portrayal seems to allow individuals to recreate the drama according to their own experiences (Duggan 70-79). This process leads to a re-establishment of control over the historical conditions of their experience, a harnessing and redirection of emotions not toward a cathartic equilibrium, but rather toward renewed efforts at personal and social transformation. This suggests that the notion of emotional catharsis once derided by theorists of popular theatre as merely meant to defend the status quo is not entirely incompatible with the idea of collective communication and transformative action as the ultimate goals of theatre.

The community of Santa María Tzejá fell victim to the scorched earth campaign of the Guatemalan military on 13 February 1982. Though the villagers had received advance warning of the army's approach and fled to their fields and the surrounding jungle, 16 members of the community were killed by the military and seven more died in the following weeks of hiding. The surviving population was evenly divided between those who fled through the jungle to 12 years of refuge in Mexico and those who remained behind under the physical and ideological control of the military, though there were two families that remained in Guatemala in one of the clandestine Communities of Population in Resistance (Taylor 25-28).

The fragmentation of the cooperative community that occurred on the day of the massacre grew more and more pronounced with each passing year. While the refugee population developed a sense of organization and political activity around the desire to return to their homelands, those who

remained behind in Guatemala lived for over a decade under the physical and ideological control of a military establishment so dominant that it led America's Watch to declare the country a "Nation of Prisoners." The distinction between the culture of learning that developed among refugees and the imposed culture of fear that existed in Guatemala would take a long time to overcome and, in some cases, remains the cause of deep divisions among Guatemala's population.<sup>7</sup> The development of the play that is the subject of this article provides a space in which people could begin to cope with these social and psychological tensions.

Randall Shea, compiler and director of the play *No hay cosa oculta que no venga a descubrirse*, began working with the people of Santa María Tzejá while in Mexico in the 1980s, married a member of the community and returned with them after the signing of the Peace Accords. While living in Santa María Tzejá, Shea was visited by James Crossen, a friend who worked as a psychologist in the United States. Crossen and Shea spoke about the many problems that existed in the newly reunited community and discovered that many of them could be attributed to the widespread effects of repressed memory and psychosocial trauma.<sup>8</sup> They spoke with community leaders about their observations as well as some suggestions for coping with the difficulties that people were experiencing; first and foremost among them was to get people to talk about the past. This notion proved quite controversial in a community that wished to put the horrors of the past behind them, yet many of the leaders felt that such an effort might lead to positive change. Despite continued depression, anxiety, insomnia, nightmares and other symptoms of psychological effects, people were reluctant to speak about the past, but eventually about 50 people decided to speak to Dr. Crossen about their memories of the violence.<sup>9</sup> One woman who participated in this process described it this way: "Our suffering is similar to carrying a very heavy sack of maize. But little by little we remove individual kernels, and it becomes easier to carry."<sup>10</sup>

It was through the process of sharing their experiences, and the need for an ongoing translation, that a written record was developed of the stories that they told. It was later this written record that provided the foundation of the aforementioned play. One member of the community of Santa María Tzejá reflects on the positive effects of this process on those who decided to take part in it:

We never had ideas, experiences, as to how to heal these things. I certainly didn't know that holding all of this in causes damage to the

person.... Santiago (James Crossen) came... and since he understood all of this he began to work with the people here, especially the women. And they began to speak of this and to feel a little more peaceful regarding what happened. (Taylor 161-62)

It was through the process of sharing one's experiences with others that healing could begin. This very process seems at once to mirror and expand on definitions of *testimonio* as a practice which, "[by] virtue of its collective representativeness is, overtly or not, an intertextual dialogue of voices, reproducing, but also creatively re-ordering historical events in a way which impresses as representative and true and which projects a vision of life and society in need of transformation (Zimmerman 12).

After the community members involved had shared their testimony of their experiences with the violence, they were converted into the primary resource material for the play. Though Randall Shea and James Crossen were the initial compilers, they worked closely with community elders on the organization and presentation of the work to the community. Following a few weeks of rehearsals, the newly-established adolescent theatre group performed for any members of the community that were interested in attending. The performance, though well received, was not without its critics and many ideas were proposed during the open discussion forum that followed the play. In addition to suggestions concerning scenery, effects and dramatic style, several discussions were generated among audience members concerning the portrayals of the army and the guerrilla that led to substantive changes in the final script.<sup>11</sup> The play itself consists of 14 scenes of varying lengths. Though most of the scenes consist of traditional monologue and dialogue, there are also very brief scenes that incorporate songs, readings from the peace accords, the bible and other sources, or simply images and sound effects. The group also used a small sound system and projection screen to bring scenes from the war into greater focus and to more accurately portray those responsible for the violence. The play was performed several times in Santa María Tzejá and constantly edited according to audience comments and discussions, but eventually the idea arose among the actors themselves that they should enter their play in a theatre festival as well as travel to other villages and share their story. In order to understand better the value of this collective performative process, it is necessary to turn to the play itself and examine the ways in which it brings private suffering into public view, turns fragmentation into reconciliation and replaces fear and intimidation with education.



The eleventh scene opens with the crack of a whip followed by cries of agony as an indigenous man is tortured by the military. A man enters from the left and apologizes for his frailties, explaining that he still suffers the lasting effects of the torture that the audience is now witnessing. The audience is thus introduced to two distinct halves of the same person on stage, the tortured man of the past and the one who now speaks of his torture. This play of temporal and spatial divisions results in an active visualization of the memories of torture that Ramón Vanux, played by an actor named Aurelio, carries inside of him. The scene progresses with a description of torture based on the story of a member of the community of Santa María Tzejá who was captured and brutally tortured by the military shortly after the massacre of the village. The implications of his story and this particular scene of the play, however, go far beyond its effects on the individual.<sup>12</sup> This scene is a powerful demonstration of the perceived value of performance in the post-war process of reconciliation. The stage is converted into one of the most secretive spaces of terror from the era of violence, the dark inner rooms of military prisons, tunnels where prisoners were held, tortured and often killed. In this way, the private experiences of torture victims are made public through the willingness of Ramón Vanux to tell his story.

As he narrates the history of his torture and explicitly describes some of the more brutal methods of the perpetrators, the actors dressed as military personnel continue their simulation on the victim. At this point the narrator stands to one side of the stage as his remembered self continues to suffer under the blows of whips and fists, a separation that continues throughout the majority of the scene. Releasing the prisoner, one of the military personnel screams at him, though directing it toward the audience with knife in hand, "You will never tell anyone what happened to you here today, Never!!" This command is followed by a long silence as the narrator weeps and his battered body lies motionless across the stage. One clear goal of the military during its scorched earth campaign was not only to wipe out any support base that the guerrilla might be able to pull from in the region, but also to repress and erase any memory or physical evidence of the processes by which they carried out their efforts. Such efforts by perpetrators to camouflage and efface all traces of their deeds, however, only strengthen the obligation to bear witness to and record the past (Funkelstein 68).

As with many other scenes in the play, didacticism wins out over denunciation. The portrayal of torture described above does not seek to lay blame, but rather serves as a means of individual healing through telling that

is passed on to the audience as an example to be followed. The torturer's command for silence is broken when the tortured narrator claims: "If the soldiers knew that I was telling you this, they would kill me and my family. But I have to denounce evil, even if they do kill me. I am in pain, but I will not remain in silence." Having spoken these words, he is able to cross the stage to look upon his broken body. The simultaneity of action and discourse that follows lays bare the very reasons for the performance that the audience is witnessing. The broken and tortured self is unconscious and unable to speak, silenced by brutality. It is only through the sharing of his story later that the victim is able to relieve his pain and begin the process of individual healing. After years of accepting the imposed silence demanded by his torturers, he is able to embrace his tortured self and exclaim, "Thirteen years have passed since my suffering. I still don't feel well, but over time, little by little, like a branch that begins to bloom, I am reconstructing my life." He speaks directly to the audience here before exiting the stage holding up the tortured body of his past and assisting both himself and the audience away from the space of victimization.

The spatial movement on stage from private victimization to public pronouncement, from prison to performance, is a manifestation of the way the play itself was developed and written – how the stories of the people of Santa María Tzejá were shared, converted into a play, and then performed by the children of the community.<sup>13</sup> In this way, the audience is exposed to the very process by which even those who have suffered the most can begin to recover from their pain. At the same time, there is an inherent message of reconnecting the individual to the social life of the community through shared experience. The very presence of the discourse of a torture victim in a public space is the result of the collective effort of many people from the community of Santa María Tzejá. Their efforts provided audiences with a visualization of the difficult process of confronting painful memories, but also with the value of shared experience in developing a renewed sense of identity and continuity after the traumatic fragmentation of "la Violencia." The collective and didactic nature of this scene is very similar to the popular theatre efforts of groups such as Grupo Teatro Escambray in Cuba and MECATE in Nicaragua. The ultimate goal of this type of theatre, rather than entertainment, is to expose and discuss contemporary social issues as well as present the means by which people can transform the conditions of their societies.

The individual process of healing as witnessed through a torture victim's self embrace is extended throughout the dramatic presentation in

order to portray the means by which a fragmented community of people can seek healing and reintegration in Guatemala's post-war era. In addition to this possibility, it presents both its actors and their audience with various means of reconstructing a more coherent narrative concerning the years of arbitrary violence suffered during the Civil War.

It is through our experiences that we shape our understanding of the world, and it is in sharing those experiences that we come to identify ourselves with others. The systematic violence and intimidation of the 1980s, in destroying the necessary conditions for this process of communication and identification, also destroyed any sense of continuity and belonging among the inhabitants of the fragmented communities (Mariss 81). This disruption of continuity closed the spaces of communication within the community through which people were able to develop and maintain their sense of place and belonging. Under such conditions, the individual tends to internalize the pain and guilt of his trauma, considering himself alone and unable to relate to any larger sense of collective identity. Thus, the physical fragmentation suffered as a result of community division was coupled with the social fragmentation resulting from the breakdown of traditional methods of sharing experience.

A subsequent scene of the play begins as black robed figures take the stage silently, their heads bowed and moving slowly to the center. Following several stories of the survivors of the 1982 massacre told in previous scenes, the spirits of the dead of Santa María Tzejá return here accompanied by one living woman. They have come for the same reason as the others who have taken the stage before them, to tell the story of their experience with the violence. The white faces of the dead stare blankly from beneath their dark hoods as one begins to speak: "My name is Santos Vicente Sarak. I was one of the first to be killed by the army. The soldiers watched my house for three weeks, but I wasn't afraid, I had done nothing wrong. But one night, they kidnapped me. My body was never found." Others speak up to tell of their violent deaths, and of their innocence. One by one the audience hears the stories of the victims, children and adolescents whose lives were cut short: "My name is Manuel Boton Lux. The army killed me on the banks of the Xalbal river..."; "My name is Andrés Ixcoy, it was the guerrilla that killed me.... Those who denounced me did it out of spite...."

These voices return from the ultimate silence of the grave to remove the false guilt that was once placed on them by the perpetrators of their deaths, but the importance of this scene goes beyond a mere attempt to clear their names. A living woman joins the spirits on stage, a survivor of the

massacre who addresses the audience on their behalf: “Many people in my community of Santa María Tzejá try to forget about the dead because it hurts to remember. But it isn’t possible to forget them, nor is it right. We have the right to speak their names with pride. The dead remain alive in our hearts and in the stories of our community. We will never stop telling their story.” The living narrator thus demands that the stories of the dead be told and that their memory be kept alive in the community.

The performance confronts the sense of isolation prevalent among the traumatized population, first on the individual level through the portrayal of a torture victim coming to terms with his past, and then on a more collective level by allowing both the survivors of the massacre and the spirits of the victims a space within which to share their stories. The shared physical space of the stage illustrates a reintegration and renewed sense of continuity despite the deaths of loved ones. Rather than simply establishing a space for telling their stories, the performance itself becomes a story about the importance of telling. This opening of a renewed dialogic space in the community of Santa María Tzejá was not only the first step to psychological healing, but also to social healing. By bringing out the experiences of the past, the people of the community were able to remember beyond the years under military control, or of organizing and human rights training in Mexico, in order to seek out their common experiences with the violence. The sense of historical continuity that is established through the processes of remembering and sharing experiences reaches across the years of arbitrary violence and intimidation in an attempt to reconstruct a sense of identity and belonging once lost in the silence of individual suffering.

This process reflects many aspects of the popular theatre movement in Latin America and Bertolt Brecht’s concept of epic theatre, a style of performance that could stand in direct contrast to traditional dramatic production (Brecht 37-42). Spectators can no longer remain merely empathetic observers; they must confront the issues raised and decide where and how they identify with them. As a space of representation, performance becomes a means of viewing the processes of human action and experience as a step toward further human action. Rather than entertaining audiences with elements either familiar or foreign to them, such performances confront audiences with the complex realities that make up the conditions of their existence and thus impose on the spectator a responsibility to understand them, consider them and, if necessary or even desired, take action to transform them. Through

this process, spaces of representation can create new spaces of action and social transformation.

The efforts at shaping a continuity of common experience described above involve the additional educational motive of informing audiences of the rights they all have, and have always had, as citizens of a Guatemalan nation. This dual purpose is most clearly illustrated in the eighth scene of the play. As a bell tolls, several actors enter the stage carrying crosses and portraying those who were killed the day of the massacre in Santa María Tzejá. They pause before the audience as a young actress reads, "Second article of the political Constitution of the Republic: It is the obligation of the state to guarantee its inhabitants life, justice, security, peace...." This is followed by the reading of the names of the dead: "Cristina Canil Suar, seven years old, Eufrasia Canil Suar...." This simultaneity of guarantees in word and violations in deed continues throughout the scene until a young man in military fatigues screams out "Silence!" Though there is a brief pause, the narrator goes on to explain that people have the right to speak out about what happened to them, to honor their lost loved ones, and to understand the Constitution of their country.

The play performed by the young actors of Santa María Tzejá addresses the importance of understanding the right of self determination guaranteed to indigenous people. Under the gaze of international observers and human rights organizations, this message became the cornerstone of efforts at community and cultural revitalization. In the context of the play, *No hay cosa oculta que no venga a descubrirse*, this message is combined with the necessity to appropriate newly opened social and cultural spaces in order to disseminate their message among a population with one of the highest rates of illiteracy in all of Latin America.

The benefits of this process reached far beyond the boundaries of the community of Santa María Tzejá. Though the first performances took place in the community itself and the audience gave advice concerning changes and corrections that should be made, the play toured nine different communities by June of 1996. As in Santa María Tzejá, the process of sharing and communicating experience as a means of defining the individual and the community had been cut off across the region during the height of the violence in the 1980s. Despite some individual resistance, the general reaction to the performance was an appreciation for bringing the painful memories of the past out into the open and encouraging people to confront them as a means of healing. According to director Randall Shea, several of the villages

undertook similar projects of organizing support groups and creating opportunities for people to share their stories of the violence and years in exile, under military control, or hiding in the jungle.

It is important to imagine the setting within which the performance took place from town to town in order to grasp the complexity of interaction it achieved. Generally, the actors would co-opt the central plaza, an area of the market place, or perhaps a large room of the community church, where they would set up the play. In appropriating these familiar public spaces, the play immediately began to undermine their long-time employment as focal points of military ideological control. Rather than gathering to hear a commander speak out against the evils of communist insurgency, or to witness the assassination of accused subversives, people were gathering to bear witness to a new discourse. Like most other Latin American popular theatre, an important part of the play itself is to break down the separation between audience and performers in this setting in order to displace the agency of the actors onto the audience members themselves. Because the message is one of generating and encouraging the sharing of experiences and memories, this step is crucial to the success of the performance. The fact that this process was enacted in the very public spaces once dominated by authoritarian discourse reveals the possibility of continuing such efforts to those who witness the performance.

The generative nature of this storytelling process produces a history that leads to action, rather than a sterile revelation of past events. In providing a challenge to years of silence, this practice shows an affirmative means of countering the tendency of dominant cultural and political discourse to favor more universal interpretations of history. The focus placed on shared and distinct experiences of individuals and communities facilitates a much greater understanding of present circumstances and therefore a willingness to work for social transformation within the new spaces provided by the processes of peace and democratization.

The significance of the final scene of the play stems as much from the movement on stage as the dialogue itself. The scene opens with a single actor carrying a candle and singing the same song that began the play. As he crosses the stage he sings alone, but is soon joined by other actors and actresses, also carrying a single candle. As the song continues, it repeats the story of the massacre, but also reminds the audience that some fled to Mexico while others stayed behind to face life under military control. At this point, the actors and actresses move at random and take up positions scattered

around the stage. The song ends and a single woman's voice speaks up from among the candles on the stage:

Thirteen years have passed since we were forced to flee from our village. But now we are almost all together again in Santa María Tzejá. We know that there is still poverty and ignorance, inequality and intolerance in Guatemala. However, we look to the future with hope. We want to study and to succeed. We know that the Constitution of Guatemala guarantees our rights. We now struggle to make these constitutional guarantees a reality.

Setting aside for the moment the danger that such claims could involve, even in 1995, it is important to note that this is the first time in the play that reference is made to the future. The social, political and cultural limitations of the post-war era are not overlooked, but rather recognized as constructions of the past that can and must be changed.

The actors' random individual movement begins to take shape as one by one they come together at the center of the stage. By candlelight they recite the names of those who died in the massacre of Santa María Tzejá. Each time a name is given, another actor or actress joins the group at the center of the stage. The last person joins the group in the form of a cross, a physical manifestation of renewed unity in the wake of 13 years of violent fragmentation. From this position, they declare in unison: "our lives were only just beginning", then extinguish their candles. The final words of the play resonate through the darkness with a double meaning. The memories of those whose names were recited remind the audience that they were cut down at a young age in the arbitrary violence of Guatemala's Civil War, yet the voices of those who recite the names echo in a different light; their lives are only just beginning. It is important to remember that many of the actors themselves were too young at the time of the violence to have any clear recollection of it, but the importance of historical continuity takes on a much different meaning in the context of the youth of Santa María Tzejá.<sup>14</sup>

The play *No hay cosa oculta que no venga a descubrirse* became a powerful mechanism through which a bridge to the past could be constructed. By understanding the experiences of their parents and friends with the violence and fragmentation brought by the scorched-earth campaign, the youth of Santa María Tzejá were able to place themselves into the larger history of struggle for social transformation. There is a continuity of experience provided by the ongoing process of storytelling involved with the development and performance of the play. Each step of this process served a distinct function

for the different individuals involved. For the adults of the community, the sharing of their experiences with the violence provided an early step in the individual healing process as well as the development of a greater communal understanding of diverse experiences during their 12 years apart. For the youth of Santa María Tzejá, the fragmentation that they experienced at an early age was compensated by the acceptance of the Mexican cultural experience as their own. Upon returning to Guatemala however, their learning about the history of their own experience through the stories of their parents provided a greater sense of continuity as well as a renewed sense of purpose in their home community.

The entire process of development and performance that I have discussed demonstrates the creation of a multifaceted space in which the stories and experiences of the community can be passed on. This manifestation of the latent traditions of oral storytelling among highland Guatemalan communities returns the responsibility for the communication of experience and the recording of history to the people of Santa María Tzejá themselves. One of the main functions of oral history is the opening of historical space to a multiplicity of voices rather than the traditional closed structure of written history that is dependent on systems of social and political power.<sup>15</sup> Through the process of developing, organizing, and experiencing the dramatic project of the youth of Santa María Tzejá, the community restored the confidence to record its own history in a way that gives legitimacy to the experiences of fragmentation and reintegration that they have experienced.

The space created through this dramatic work is of central importance to the development of communities such as Santa María Tzejá after the violence and the return of the refugee populations. The demographic division and the geographical location of the community in the Ixcán region make it an example of great importance for other communities. The reconstructed memories of the violence that once caused so much suffering due to repression were converted, through storytelling and performance, into a locus in which the search for identity intersects with the search for history. It is the performance of the collectively constructed memories, first by the individuals speaking with the psychologist or with one another, and then by the children in the form of an organized play, that leads to true social and personal development. The refugees, those who stayed behind, adults, adolescents, all experienced a traumatic moment of fragmentation that had a deep effect on their understanding of and ability to express their own experience. For this reason, in Guatemala as in many other countries in Latin America and around



the world, the search for personal and communal history has become synonymous with a simultaneous reconfiguration of both personal and communal identity (Bhabha 19-29).

The similarities between the efforts of the community of Santa María Tzejá and the broader popular theatre movement in Latin America are certainly not coincidental. Theatre's physical mobility and capacity for broad outreach as well as its collective and public nature combine to make it particularly suitable for the type of reconciliation and social transformation described here. Despite the considerable similarities of *No hay cosa oculta que no venga a descubrirse* to other popular theatre movements of the twentieth century, however, it is important to recognize its independent development as well as the evolution of its approach to social transformation. One defining characteristic of twentieth-century popular theatre was the fact that the emotional processes involved with traditional notions of catharsis were steadily supplanted by efforts at encouraging and even requiring action from audience members. The dramatic efforts of the community of Santa María Tzejá discussed here indicate an emergent cultural production that no longer understands catharsis and action as mutually exclusive. Indeed, the type of emotional purgation historically employed as and derided as an instrument of social control returns here as a vital element in the process of collective social transformation.

Recently, the increased polarization of Guatemalan and other Central American countries has placed a heavy burden on cultural production as a means of representing and reflecting on the conditions of society. The consolidation of both reconciliation and transformative action, as seen in the play *No hay cosa oculta que no venga a descubrirse* is an example of emergent cultural efforts that seek innovative ways of approaching contemporary issues.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Randall Shea, author and director of the play *No hay cosa oculta, que no venga a descubrirse, no hay secreto que no llegue a saberse* for sharing with me a photocopy of the original script as well as a videotape of a performance. All quotes from the play included here are my translation of the script.

<sup>2</sup> Randall Shea wrote *No hay cosa oculta, que no venga a descubrirse, no hay secreto que no llegue a saberse* in 1995 for performance by the youth of Santa María Tzejá. Though it

has not been published, several scenes from the play appear on the video documentary of the same title, dir. Randall Shea and James Crossen, Comunicarte, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> After long negotiations, the Guatemalan government and representatives of the refugee population signed the Accord on the Repatriation of Guatemalan Refugees in Mexico on October 8, 1992. It established the conditions and procedures of the collective and organized return of the thousands of Guatemalan refugees in Mexico.

<sup>4</sup> There are many editions and interpretations of the *Güegüense o El Macho-Ratón*. For a concise discussion of the work and its various interpretations, see Urbina, 53-62.

<sup>5</sup> Judith Weiss points out in her study of Latin American popular theatre that "in the early part of the twentieth century, in virtually every Latin American country, anarchist and socialist workers' circles were active sponsors of cultural activities. Amateur theatre was one such activity... which can be seen as key in the promotion of a class-based theatre and a response to both the organization of the commercial theatre and ruling-class ideology which that theatre tended to promote." (Weiss 103)

<sup>6</sup> Though professional companies did exist during the 1970s and 1980s, such as Teyocoyani and Nixtayolero, their primary function was to work closely on efforts with grassroots theatre groups through the Association of Cultural Workers (ASC) and the Movement of Campesino Artistic and Theatrical Expression (MECATE). See Weiss, "Teyocoyani" 71-79.

<sup>7</sup> Clark Taylor describes other communities in the Ixcán region where return to original lands was blocked by the villagers. This resistance is attributed as much to ideological and experiential difference, as to continued military threats concerning contact with 'subversives' (Taylor 94-96).

<sup>8</sup> "...from the concept of psychosocial trauma, we would understand that the central key of the trauma is the destruction of the indigenous community. We are going to understand the necessary reconceptualization of her/his cultural belonging and look for spaces where we can work in the reconstruction of her/his community belonging." *Trauma psicosocial y adolescentes latinoamericanos: formas de acción grupal*, ed. David Becker, Germán Morales, and María Inés Aguilar (Santiago, Chile: Instituto Latinoamericano de Salud Mental y Derechos Humanos). (Quoted in Taylor 158.)

<sup>9</sup> Information concerning the process of developing community discussion and the writing of the play comes from an interview with Randall and his wife. Randall Shea and Juana Pérez Gómez, personal interview, Ann Arbor, Michigan: November 16, 2000.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Randall Shea's unpublished essay, "Trauma and Holistic Recovery Work in a Guatemalan Scorched Earth Community", 12. (My translation.)

<sup>11</sup> Randall Shea and Juana Pérez Gómez, personal interview, 16 November 2000.

<sup>12</sup> The widespread use of torture during the violence in Guatemala makes this scene particularly shocking in the post-war context. Guatemalan priest and anthropologist Ricardo Falla describes the use of torture in his book *Masacres de la selva*: "Systematic torture was integral to every level of repression. Sometimes obtaining information from the victim was emphasized and sometimes the torture was aimed at terrorizing others. Terror may have two objectives: to inhibit all activity against the army and to force people to provide information. I have found evidence of individual torture by well-known methods ... and also of collective torture." (Falla 184).

<sup>13</sup> Randall Shea and Juana Pérez Gómez, personal interview, 16 November 2000.

<sup>14</sup> The disenchantment of the youth was a further contributing factor to the divisions that existed in the community when the refugees returned, expanding the results of diverse experiences to the realm of generational distinctions. One member of the community recalls that "some of them [the youth] were affected by the more urban ambience of Cancún. Many adolescents thought of themselves as pure Mexican. They rejected the mud and mosquitoes in

Guatemala, which they knew only as small children. One could see the influence of their Mexican experience ... in their way of speaking, dressing, cutting their hair, the disco music they listened to, and the way they danced ... Young returnees milled around the village center dressed in shorts, the girls with modern hairdos and makeup, having no defined role and complaining of boredom (Taylor 81).

<sup>15</sup> The play thus replaces the "grand patterns of written history (with) the awkwardly individual human lives which are its basis." Thompson 12.

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