

## The Nicaraguan Drama: Theatre of Testimony

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At a Sandinista rally in Nicaragua's Department of Rivas, a group of *campesinos* are reenacting a scene which took place at a dairy farm just before the triumph of the Sandinista Revolution of 1979.<sup>1</sup> One of the *campesinos* pretends to be a cow while another man "milks" him and talks to a neighbor.

"*Compañero*, I'm going to tell you what it was like before the revolution around here, like the time I got caught drinking some of the boss's milk," says the man doing the milking.

"And how did you drink the milk in those days, *compañero*, like this?" The neighbor grabs the cow's imaginary teat and squirts some of the precious liquid into his mouth.

"No, it was with a glass, *compañero*, just one glass of milk. That's all it took to start a revolution on this dairy farm."

The *campesinos* show the audience what it was like to work for subsistence wages, being hungry, stealing milk and dealing with the boss' wrath. The acting is stiff and rustic, the dialogue rough and barely audible, but to the hundreds of *campesinos* and their families witnessing this drama under the hot and humid sky, this is Academy Award winning material. This is their life, they know the story well, it has taken on mythic proportions and it is being retold all over Nicaragua with different characters and settings—the drama of the poor overthrowing the rich.

Nicaraguan theatre, as sponsored by the Association of Sandinista Cultural Workers under the general direction of the Ministry of Culture, is a theatre of testimony. The scripts are mostly improvised, the direction mainly collective and most of the actors have never been formally trained. In all, there are about 100 groups.

At a secondary school in Matagalpa, in the northern part of the country near the border with Honduras, a group of soldiers in fatigues, combat boots, jungle hats and pistol at the belt, put down their rifles and pick up their guitars to warm up the crowd before the main events. They are not play soldiers, barely two days ago they were fighting CIA-sponsored counter-revolutionaries

(*contras*) in nearby Nuevo Segovia province. The group is one of 12 "cultural brigades" who tour the battlefield serving as musician soldiers.

The first theatre piece presented is by another group of soldiers who relate a true incident that occurred in Matagalpa, scene of some of the most intense fighting between the *muchachos* (boys) and Anastasio Somoza's American trained National Guard. The audience is forced to come to grips with a very graphic, realistic representation of two *guardias* beating a pregnant woman suspected of being a Sandinista sympathizer. She aborts. A plastic toy doll is used to represent the child in this crude but moving scene.

This is followed by a very delicate ballet done by barefoot men and women in fatigues. Their graceful, bird-like gestures represent the determination of the people's spirit to resist invasion by U.S. troops in the same spirit as Augusto César Sandino. Sandino fought a successful guerrilla war against U.S. Marines during the 1920's and 30s. This group is called the Frente Norte Danza and shows another facet of Nicaraguan drama.

The presentations in Matagalpa end with an outrageous burlesque by Teatro Experimental Miguel de Cervantes relating the supposed "Hollywood" invasion of Nicaragua by platoon-crazed U.S. Marines. The officers of the platoon are flaming drag queens who try to whip their reluctant charges into a patriotic fever pitch against the Sandinistas. The piece abounds with off-color jokes and sexual slapstick. The crowd of 300 students roar with laughter.

The director of the above group is Jeannette Gómez. She wears a standard military uniform with a rifle slung over her shoulder. When asked about the topic of homosexuality she explains that "although homosexuality is tolerated in the New Nicaragua, it is not as visible as in the days under Somoza." The group, former university students, are all "straight" but have a tradition of using satire as a weapon in their work.

During the pathetic finale of the Somoza regime there was hardly any national theatre to speak of, most of it being imported from the United States or Europe. The theatre which did exist was strictly for profit and catered to bourgeoisie tastes. It made a hurried exit to Miami for what proved to be an extended run. Those theatre halls which had been built in the first part of the twentieth century were quickly converted into movie halls with the invasion of American and Mexican cinema.

Yet the "Nicas" as they call themselves had a unique culture as is evidenced by their food, music, dance, costume, and poetry of Nobel Prize winner Rubén Darío. The problem was that the ruling class tended to denigrate their own culture in favor of the "American" ideal. Somoza, for example, was educated at West Point and even though he was bilingual he actually *thought* in English.

The masses of people, especially, were made to feel inferior. The upper crust told them that what they had was of little value and only that which came from abroad or academia was worthwhile. After the revolution, it became the task of the Sandinista cultural workers "to popularize the culture by utilizing the participation of the people as assimilators and creators," according to critic Manzanar Gamboa. There was a need to revitalize and re-evaluate the culture.

One can not discuss art in Nicaragua without mentioning the Minister of Culture, Ernesto Cardenal, a Jesuit priest and poet. Cardenal was born to upper class parents in the colonial city of Granada. At the age of 23 he went to Columbia University in New York to study American literature, where he translated several American poets into Spanish. Cardenal, with his long white hair and beard and beret, seems to be a ghost of the Beatnik era.

At the age of 37 he entered the Monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemane in Kentucky and was ordained a priest in 1965. Shortly afterwards he founded an agricultural colony of *campesinos* on Solentiname Island in the middle of Lake Nicaragua which developed primitivist painting and handicrafts as well as a poetry workshop. Cardenal and his students also studied liberation theology and eventually made the decision to join the Sandinista Liberation Front, participating in several armed actions. Somoza's Air Force later bombed Solentiname and destroyed all the buildings.

Cardenal credits much of his ideas on art and revolution to a trip he took to Cuba in 1970. In a New York Times *Magazine* article written by Alan Riding, Cardenal is quoted as saying, "it was like a second conversion. Before then, I saw myself as a revolutionary, but I had confused ideas. I was trying to find a third way, which was the Revolution of the Gospel, but then I saw that Cuba was the Gospel put into practice. And only when I converted to Marxism could I write religious poetry."

Although some of Nicaragua's art programs are modeled after the Cuban example, there is not a strict orthodoxy. Alan Riding points out that the "Moscow brand of socialist realism" is often ridiculed and quotes the Minister of the Interior, Tomas Borge, a poet and the only founding member of the FSLN still alive, as saying, "we don't need to be pamphleteers to be revolutionaries. We must combat sectarian groups who think that an author or painter who is not writing a protest poem or drawing a political poster is not a revolutionary."

Folk dancing and folk music are widely encouraged or adapted and American rock music is still being heard on the airwaves as is the protest music of Carlos Mejía Godoy. Nicaraguan "ballet folklórico" is a blend of Spanish and Indian with a lively marimba accompaniment. The costumes are wildly exotic, a blaze of colors and feathers, and long flowing dresses.

The indigenous tradition is being re-emphasized because during the 50-year-long Somoza dynasty the "Spanish" side of the culture was dominant. The word "Nicaragua" means "to this point came the Aztecs" and most Nicaraguans today are descendants of that Nahuatl speaking tribe. During the 1820's Nicaragua was a part of the Mexican Republic.

In the proud city of Leon, much of whose center was bombed by Somoza's Air Force, the group Teoyocoyani (Beginning of all things) acts out an agit-prop skit dealing with the turbulent history of Nicaragua. It is a story of Spanish and American invasions. The actors assume a variety of roles by donning hats and cloaks or picking up swords and hoes. The end of the piece is a stage picture of actors holding up a machete, book, machine gun, saw, and guitar.

Finally, there is the highlight of this theatrical tour of Nicaragua, a group of high school students who call themselves Xilonem (Goddess of Maiz) and

perform with the traditional “fantoche.” Fantoche are twelve foot high puppets on stilts who are manipulated by three people—one guiding the main body and two on either side on each arm. The dozen or so students are the “chorus” who make the puppets talk to each other in rhyme.

The puppeteers relate the story of a young maiden named Marisela who is pure of heart. Her father gives her to a young man named Hugo in marriage on the condition that he always love and respect her. All the action takes place shortly after the triumph of the Sandinista Revolution. The young bride takes the victory of her people to heart and when her country is in danger of being invaded she automatically joins the Committee for the Defense of the Sandinista Revolution.

The Revolution asks her to be head of the night watch on her block against intrusions by counter-revolutionaries. This causes Marisela to be away from the house at odd hours and is the source of much friction between her and Hugo. Finally, a terrible fight ensues during which Hugo abuses Marisela. She leaves him and goes back to live with her father. Hugo is repentant and pleads for her forgiveness but is rejected several times by Marisela. It is not until he joins the Committee for the Defense of the Sandinista Revolution and allows her to be an independent woman and forsakes his machismo that they are reconciled.

After four years the New Nicaraguan theatre is still going through growing pains, but its roots are strong and it promises to be a healthy child.

## NOTES

1. These comments and reflections result from the Second Encounter of Theatre Artists from Latin America and the Caribbean, held June 24-26 in Granada, Nicaragua.