

## Teyocoyani and the Nicaraguan Popular Theatre

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The Nicaraguan group Teyocoyani, based in the province of León since it was founded in 1980, is a major force in the cultural movement and in the reconstruction effort. The group (whose name means "the beginning of all things") began as Nicaragua embarked on its unique campaign of national reconstruction through literacy and public health programs, agrarian reform, and the rebuilding of towns and cities that had been devastated by Somoza's troops and air force.

Popular theatre continues today, in the midst of the *desgaste* of the Contra war, to serve the reconstruction effort in a variety of original ways. The seeds of this theatre movement were sown during the struggle against Somoza, when guerrillas (some of whom had worked in university theatre) developed the use of popular theatre techniques for the conscientization of peasants and rural workers.<sup>1</sup>

Teyocoyani and Nixtayolero, its counterpart in Matagalpa, were the two professional groups that set out to work with over two hundred grassroots community groups throughout Nicaragua after the triumph of the revolution. Their mandate was to provide training and an example to grassroots theatre workers, both as artists and as members of the emerging new society. Consequently, their work had to integrate artistic considerations and a concrete contribution to social development.

The groups belong to the Nicaraguan Theatre Foundation, a non-profit organization that works closely with the Ministry of Culture and the ASTC (Asociación Sandinista de Trabajadores de la Cultura, the artists' union). The Foundation is the legal owner of most of the property and resources held or developed by its member groups, and it receives financial assistance from the Nicaraguan government and from international development agencies, such as the Canadian organization Inter Pares.<sup>2</sup>

The Foundation provides a substantial amount of assistance to newly-formed groups and it remains a source of aid for established groups like

Teyocoyani.<sup>3</sup> All groups, however, are expected to seek matching funds and eventually to become less dependent on Foundation aid and, in fact, to capitalize the Foundation through special projects. (Some of the projects are described in this article.)

The government pays the salaries of less than half of the regular members of the group. (Salaries are between US \$20 and \$30 per month.) The group must therefore find alternative funding sources to pay its unsalaried members and to boost the monthly income of those on the state's payroll.

Over the past seven years, Teyocoyani has embarked on different types of projects. The diversification can be summarized as follows: (1) development of an economic base and infrastructure for the group, to promote self-sufficiency; (2) development of a repertoire of original works based on research into issues, traditions and cultural needs of the communities in which they work; (3) touring (through Nicaragua and abroad), and (4) workshops for community workers (*animadores*) on the uses and techniques of theatre for grassroots development. The four areas combined represent both material and spiritual contributions to the communities they serve and to the national reconstruction effort as a whole. Much of the groundwork for these different areas of work has been laid within the last three years.

(1) *Infrastructure*. In 1985, Teyocoyani was granted a section of land on a cooperative formed after the revolution, on property previously owned by an associate of Somoza who had left Nicaragua. The group's members are responsible for the productivity of their own part of the co-op, but they have established a good working relationship with other co-op members, who now will offer to look after their crops and animals if the entire group has to be away for a time.

The group plants corn, beans and potatoes, and raises chickens and pigs. They have also built a greenhouse and introduced sorghum, tomatoes, avocados and other products not commonly grown in the area. They recently expanded a naturally-occurring bamboo grove into a small plantation, which provides sturdy, lightweight materials for props and sets and will be the basis for a small furniture-manufacturing industry employing local workers.

Initially, they lacked their own space. In 1982-83 the Municipal Theatre of León became their headquarters, and the city of León remains one of their main artistic centers, although their current rural base occupies most of their time and it is here that they plan to bring their families.

The group now resides in a communal house on the co-op, and they have been constructing a covered structure in which to hold workshops, rehearsals and performances. Most of the twelve current members live away from their families, who are scattered throughout Nicaragua.

They visit their families once or twice a month. One man's family is in the Río San Juan area; the long journey makes it impossible for him to visit more than once every five or six weeks. Another member's family (wife and two children, three and six years old) is in the northern border region, where

his wife is in charge of a health outpost--a likely target for Contra terrorist attacks. Teyocoyani's members live under constant psychological stress, yet it does not appear to affect their work. They speak in soft understatement of the dangers facing their families and the risks they take whenever they tour the war zones, but none of the six with whom I spoke ever dwelt on their problems.

One of the immediate plans of Teyocoyani calls for the construction of small housing units on co-op land, where the families can come to live and share in all aspects of the group's work. Two of the group members told me in June 1987 that they hoped to begin implementing this plan within the next eighteen months.

Living conditions have made it difficult to keep members, particularly female ones. The one female member still with the group in mid-1987 could not participate in the Canadian tour because she was going into labor the week they left Nicaragua. In general, it appears that women are less interested than men in pursuing a theatre career; prejudice against what used to be considered an "immoral," Bohemian lifestyle dies hard. It is therefore understandable that women should choose to become technicians or doctors instead. Furthermore, it is difficult for the group, which maintains an organic connection to traditional rural culture, to have non-related women and men living together in a communal household and still maintain some credibility in their constituency. Bringing their families to live with them is clearly important both for the peace of mind and productivity of the group and for the prospects of integrating women on a more permanent basis into the artistic and the socioeconomic work of the group.

(2) *Repertoire and artistic method.* Teyocoyani's repertoire is based largely on collective creation. Subjects range from the more specific, like the problems or attitudes of workers, technical advisors or managers in a single community or work environment, to the more general, like the situation of the peasant in the current crisis.

The themes and subjects, as well as the structural elements, are selected after a period of study, research, and discussion. In most cases, the group spends between three weeks and three months living and working in a target community within the 80 mile radius of their "territory" in León. Specific constituencies include peasants (*campesinos*), small farmers, workers in small industry, and gold miners. They devote a great deal of time to careful observation and to talking with the local residents, and they engage continually in internal discussion about their findings.

Teyocoyani professes its revolutionary commitment, its members say quite sincerely, through the openness of its approach to problems and of its method. They fear dogmatic solutions and prefer to present an issue in a way that encourages the audiences to react and involve themselves in discussion. Their method and style of work reflect the same principles. They call it "theatre of collective reflection," a very appropriate term in every sense of the word.

There is little, if any, *a priori* selection of themes. The first stage of their collective creation involves simply the sharing of every member's stories and personal experiences in the target community. The group selects common threads and topics and the most outstanding single elements from each story, which they then develop into a rough version, in the following order of tasks: thematic objectives, characterization, definition of place, and line of conflict (with the solution always open-ended).

Improvisation and discussion alternate for a period ranging from three to eight weeks, before the final text is set down. Most rehearsals are open-often because they must be held in the streets or other public places, for lack of space; they attract varying numbers of people, many of whom usually contribute to the development of the work with observations, corrections and alternative possibilities about themes, characterizations, language and idiomatic speech, gesture and dance or movement.

Much of the work, in fact, involves mimicry (of typical local speech and body language), the recruitment of local experts in traditional dance and music, and the respectful representation of cultural values, some of which have been kept virtually secret from outsiders for centuries (for example, the custom of rural inhabitants of saluting the four winds before entering a body of water—an aboriginal practice which has persisted as part of the peasant subculture of Nicaragua and, like many others, is never carried out in the presence of strangers to their culture).

(3) *Touring*. Teyocoyani participates in national and international theatre festivals and has toured in Sweden and Canada. They perform in Managua, where their plays are intended to serve as a bridge between rural culture and the city, although the meaning or the intention of specific aspects of their work might not always be understood by audiences in the capital. These could be traditional elements alien to city-dwellers, or, in one instance that was mentioned to me by a Canadian colleague, a criticism of the attitudes or performance of local officials which was misinterpreted by a high-ranking member of the audience in Managua as a criticism of the Sandinista leadership. (This reaction was rebutted by other leaders, including novelist-Vice-President Sergio Ramírez.)

The language barrier has not been a major factor in Canada and Sweden because of the equal value given in their best productions to music, ritual dance, and gesture. In their 1986 production, "Juan y su mundo," dialogue was not the sole dominant feature: non-Spanish-speaking audiences enjoyed the visual and musical components of the play, thanks to which the work approximated folk drama more than political theatre.

"Juan y su mundo" uses the dream-flashback device (which was successfully introduced by Nixtayolero in their 1983 "Ojo al Cristo")<sup>4</sup> to integrate the Native American tradition, the present state of war and Nicaragua's history of invasion and enslavement by foreign tribes and nations. The dream is induced by a comical but convincing witch doctor in a peasant reluctant to take sides

in the Contra war. The flashback involves native warriors who perform dances and rituals and are enslaved by the invasion of a foreign tyrant, who appropriates everything (from a peasant hut to the sacred moon and the water) from his fortress high on a precarious bamboo tower.

The natives, debased at first by alcohol and economic slavery, struggle successfully to break the tyrant's grip and overthrow him literally, in a well-conceived toppling of the bamboo tower. Juan returns to the present without having quite understood the moral of the witch doctor's play-within-the-play. He becomes the victim of an attack by contemporary invaders and is forced to struggle for his life in a terrifying and graceful open-ended finale of leaps and balletic movement.

The work has many moving moments, cleverly paced with the comic and the satirical scenes. The hero's acrobatic struggle against the white shroud of death with which the invaders attempt to strangle him is a tour de force. The special place of the moon and the water in the life of the peasantry is lovingly represented in hand-painted and silkscreened emblems reminiscent of the best of Bread and Puppet Theatre. These images are in themselves sufficient to breach any linguistic barrier.

The group's foreign tours bring in some much-needed hard currency as well as follow-up solidarity work in the host countries. Teyocoyani receives letters and gifts from schoolchildren in Sweden and supplies, musical instruments and money from artists and admirers in both Sweden and Canada.

The tours have also served to establish valuable artistic connections and to provide opportunities for professional development. In Canada, for instance, representatives of the development agencies that fund Nicaraguan cultural work saw the group's performance--and came away more enthusiastic than ever. The group met theatre workers from Canada (including native groups), Jamaica, Africa and India, with whom they shared workshop and collective creation techniques.

(4) *Workshops.* Teyocoyani's contribution to grassroots development work has included their workshops for community organizers and facilitators (*animadores*). Most of these workshops are held at the group's home base, with the participation of representatives of community organizations from throughout the region.

The workshops run between one and three weeks, and involve basic drama techniques, skills enhancement for facilitators of group processes, and the sharing of ideas and problem-solving from the different communities represented. The workshops offer participants the opportunity to acquire special skills from one another, not only from the workshop leaders. Teyocoyani, in turn, has benefitted from the workshops by learning more about the specific priorities and unique dynamics of the individual communities represented; from experience and expertise in farming and animal husbandry, and from the incentive to develop new projects that can benefit the population at large, such as job creation plans and nutrition programs.

Workshop participants share meals which include fruits and vegetables imported to the co-op by Teyocoyani (mainly foods high in vitamins and minerals, such as tomatoes, avocados, citrus fruits, and other products to which the local inhabitants are unaccustomed). After two weeks of acquiring a taste for these foods and learning how to prepare them, they return home with seedlings, seeds and plants, which will help raise nutritional standards in the community. This is being done in a period of increasing difficulties in transportation and government outreach (by health workers and nutritionists), and it is a significant moral and material gesture by the group against the Contras' war of attrition.

Teyocoyani has also become one of the recognized links between the city and the countryside, between government policymakers and twentieth-century technology on one hand and grassroots leadership and traditional society on the other.

Their research into attitudes and values facilitates development work and integrates it more smoothly into the "natural" cycles and cultural systems of the local communities. This is accomplished through consulting sessions and workshops for such agencies as the Agrarian Reform Institute, in which Teyocoyani educates the representatives of modern technological change and centralized planning about some of the deepest-held beliefs and values of rural society--down to such important details as the proper phases of the moon for planting and sowing. The government is evidently paying more than lip-service to local autonomy and respect for the people's culture.

*Contributions to reconstruction.* Group members' responses to questions about their concrete priorities invariably include a reference to the spiritual and material welfare of the population with which they work. Projects and overall plans must balance the economic, visible benefits with the spiritual benefits represented by conscientization, artistic process and product, and the retrieval, safeguarding and diffusion of indigenous cultural values.

This balance has proven to be both desirable and possible in all the areas of Teyocoyani's work: infrastructure, repertoire and artistic process, touring and workshops.

Their work as members of the farming co-op is an example of the artists' commitment to the community and to implementing the objectives and tasks of their society, and it gains them respect for their moral leadership and cooperation. By generating new sources of income, they benefit their immediate community as well as the Theatre Foundation.

The participatory process of artistic creation increases audiences and contributes to winning confidence in the artist as a member of the society. The works which they produce are a validation of local identity (the community's cultural and spiritual values) and expressions of the needs of the community, and they integrate contemporary concerns with traditional values, promoting a balanced perspective on both.

Their touring abroad brings in hard currency, material aid and solidarity, and it contributes to the professional development of the group. Their performances have become a reliable voice of rural society in Managua and other urban areas, and, locally, they are synonymous with the empowerment of the community.

The training of grassroots workers is a tool for education and problem-resolution in outlying areas of the province of León, and it helps develop an interest in the arts and cultural expression. Their consulting work with the ministries of education, culture and agrarian reform is a force for the preservation of traditional culture and the affirmation of local identity at a national level.

The challenge faced by artists like those of Teyocoyani is amazing, but, for an outside observer, their responses to the challenge have been even more amazing. In less than two years they have developed a sophisticated operation that looks after the material needs of a dozen persons and contributes to the growth of their farming co-op and to the subsistence of other groups through the Theatre Foundation. They have initiated small job creation projects, a nutrition program, and grassroots workshops in the arts and in social change.

They have toured and won more friends for their nation in two countries that lead the non-Latin West in survival aid to Nicaragua (Canada and Sweden), and they have built new bridges, within Nicaragua, between the countryside and the cities. They are validating traditional culture by presenting it to rural communities which for four hundred years had been taught to hide it and be ashamed of it, and to the technicians of change who are forced to adapt their foreign formulas to the needs of the local population. Project by project, they are seen as a proof of the possibility of progress and growth in the face of U.S. hostility and its proxy war.

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## Notes

1. See Chris Brooks, *Now We Know The Difference* (Toronto, 1983).

2. Inter Pares is one of several non-governmental organizations involved in development work in Central America which receive some support from CIDA (the Canadian International Development Agency) and from private sources and volunteers. Some of this information is based on conversations with the Inter Pares and CIDA representatives during the Fourth International Popular Theatre Festival of the Canadian Popular Theatre Alliance (Sydney, Nova Scotia, May 1987).

Members of the Jamaican group Sistren, whose artistic and development work closely resembles that of the Nicaraguan groups, provided much helpful information in their workshops; Sistren too receives Canadian development aid funding, and is a valuable subject of reference.

3. Most of the material for this article (which was written in the summer of 1987) is derived from extensive conversations with four members of Teyocoyani: Filiberto Rodríguez, Alfredo Rivera, Pablo Pupiro and Valentín Castillo, and with Chris Brooks, who has worked with the Nicaraguan theatre. (Filiberto worked previously with Nixtayolero. Alfredo is one of the few founding members who remain in Teyocoyani.)

4. I wish to thank Beatriz Rizk and Claudia Kaiser-Lenoir for pointing out this apparent influence of "Ojo al Cristo!" on "Juan y su mundo," and for access to Rizk's unpublished manuscript and Kaiser-Lenoir's notes (some the latter published in the ATINT Newsletter, 1984) reviewing the Encuentro de Teatristas Latinamericanos y del Caribe, held in Granada, Nicaragua, in June 1983.