

Theatre of the Devout:
The passionate approach of
theatre students in Trujillo, Peru

by Katie Ackerman
July 17, 2002

Introduction

I never knew I was a theatrical anthropologist.

I knew I was theatrical: I have spent thirteen of my twenty years actively participating in theatre, beginning as a seven year old child when I fell in love with performing art. At first I think I just liked the applause. But my motives shifted somewhere, from a thirst for attention to a deep interest in the substance of my work. I emerged with questions about its meaning, its spiritual and intellectual implications for myself, and eventually, society and humanity on the whole. Now for me, theatre is a process of discovery. It involves stepping into another person's skin, analyzing their actions, studying their language, and eventually creating a performance that resonates on some fundamental human level.

Fast forward to June 15, 2002 in the Salt Lake International Airport at 6:00 in the morning. A nervous girl sits solitary in front of a long window with a bandana on her head, flip flops on her feet, and a newly-forming sense of adventure that misgives somewhat now that she is face-to-face with her journey. She scribbles in her notebook: "How I got here is truly a mystery, myself a home-grown, barely-sprouting-what?-Mormon? theatre major? Not a world traveler, certainly not an anthropological field researcher."

But a month and 2000 miles later, I realize that theatre and ethnography are really the same thing—they just employ different methods to approach the same underlying ideas. My cross-cultural experience brought me a new kind of understanding of humanity. I was awed by the differences between that which is familiar to me and that which is familiar to another. I felt out of place sometimes, uncomfortable, challenged. But like rehearsing a play, I discovered much through trial and error, conversation, and establishing real relationships. Ethnographers simply immerse themselves in another world, the way actors do, to discover some fundamental truth. And perhaps now it is not the difference that awes me, but the similarity.

Theatre theory, like any discipline, is (of course) a broad and often complicated topic. This summary is not intended as a comprehensive survey of all theoretical views, nor as an in-depth exploration of any of these approaches; rather, it is a quick overview of ideas specifically relevant to this report that can provide continuity to the reader who has little background in understanding styles of theatrical training.

The training that I am receiving at Utah State University finds its basis in *realism*, which is the idea that honesty in acting means building a character as life-like, or as “realistically,” as possible. This includes creating richly nuanced and detailed work, individual in its nature as opposed to stereotyped or generalized. We focus on things such as physical carriage, vocal inflection, cadence, tone, placement, etc., right down to the very thoughts and unspoken objectives of the character portrayed.

This acting style came to the foreground thanks to the theories of a man named Constantin Stanislavski, often referred to as the father of realism. Stanislavski proposed that the work should come from the inside-out. It is psychology-based and internal, asserting that the actor must feel the emotions of the character in order to portray them. “Indicating” emotion, such as over-exaggerating an action to “show” the audience that one is angry, is discouraged. If one feels genuinely, the audience will know. The idea is that once one understands the emotional and psychological world of the character, the rest follows.

Methods

My first introduction to Peruvian theatre was June 21, 2002. Along with a group of fellow students, I attended a monologue festival in Trujillo with Lima-based actor Edgard Guillen performing *Faust*. The monologue itself flew way over my head, because my Spanish language skills are somewhat elementary, but it was there that I met three young theatre students. Yonel, Alejandro, and Andrés filled the seats in front of us. We discovered

Right now I am a junior in Utah State University's theatre department. My experience there has helped me define who I am artistically, and how I approach theatre. It is a small department, especially for those of us pursuing a performance (as opposed to technical or educational) emphasis. We are required to take various acting classes, voice classes, and some movement classes. We are training ourselves to produce realistic characters on stage, to market ourselves effectively, and to get work in the relatively healthy job market that exists in the U.S. for theatre, film, and TV actors. Individual artistic philosophy often comes second to the emphasis on being an actor who is employable. My own grandiose ideas regarding the nature of theatre, the process of discovery, the search for truth with a capital "T," and so forth, are peppered by a desire to find a way to "make it"—not necessarily "make it big" but at least "make a living"—in theatre.

Upon arrival in Peru, I became interested in understanding how theatre students in my same age group approach their art. I knew the opportunities for employment must be scarce. So I set out to discover the aspirations of theatre students in Trujillo, Peru, and how and what drives them to pursue art.

Background

I based my research out of a post-secondary theatre school at the Instituto Nacional de Cultura (INC) in Trujillo, Peru. It is a five-year program in which students pursue a certificate in theatre performance or theatre teaching. Once there, I discovered a large theoretical difference between the artistic philosophy that seems to govern their involvement, and the ideas that serve as the backbone for the education I am receiving at Utah State. Therefore, since it is the framework from which I am comparing my experiences in Peru, a brief summary of the theatrical theory that is the foundation of my training becomes necessary background information for this report.

that Yonel speaks English. We chatted for a while before the performance started, and by the end of the night, we made arrangements to meet the following Monday at the theatre school in the INC.

Most of my research took place in the form of participant observation. I became an adopted student for a week and a half, attending classes, observing rehearsals, and taking part in the creation of an original independent work with Yonel, Alejandro, and Andres. Through my involvement, I got to know many of the students, and conducted formal written interviews with four of them. The information used in this report comes from those participant observations, as well as comparisons to my own experiences as a theatre student at Utah State.

Passion and Metaphysical Language

These students approach theatre with passion and fervor. It is more than a hobby or something that they casually enjoy: it serves as a cornerstone for the way they experience life. Regarding his desires to enter the theatre school and pursue acting, 20-year-old student Alejandro Lizarazo Grados told me: "I only knew that it was necessary for me. ... These are dreams that I have had since childhood; I think it was natural for me to follow because it was always born in me." He speaks of a need to involve himself in theatre, that it is "natural" and "in-born." This kind of language implies a sentiment that there is no other option for fulfillment. In fact, theatrical involvement often serves as something that they use as a primary defining characteristic beyond the classroom or the stage. When I asked student Yonel Saavedra Carrion his reasons for pursuing theatre, he said simply, "Because that is what I am—an actor. I couldn't live if I didn't dedicate myself to art."

This absolute zeal for theatre creates a fundamental artistic philosophy that carries with it intensely personal—even spiritual—implications. In the written interview that I

administered, I asked the question, "To you, what is theatre? How do you understand it?" Without fail, the answers I received dealt with spirituality, metaphysics, or a desire to produce work that spoke on some deep internal human level. Mónica Pérez Gutierrez told me: "Theatre is to live a new life in every person I portray, like being reborn every day." The language employed in her statement is bold. She speaks of being reborn, which alludes to more than merely taking on another set of characteristics. It is a holistic occurrence—almost a transformation—something that touches all of her and rejuvenates her. It brings to mind language often used in conjunction with religious rituals such as baptism. Indeed, she continues the use of metaphysical terms: "Although many times it is too much of a sacrifice, that is the idea—to learn and to suffer each day." She speaks of sacrifice and suffering, as though art requires penitence and humility to practice it. Like the ideas of Grotowski or Artaud¹, she has wrapped herself into the pursuit of grand truth through theatrical endeavors.

Charles Michel Ritatigere, in his second year at the school, said this: "The theatre for me goes deeper than the stage. It is the creation of the mind... and it permits you to know more, spiritually and physically, about the universe and society." Here he discusses theatre as not just a means of expression, but a process of *creating* the mind. It is a way to shape and craft reality. He emphasizes the acquisition of both physical and spiritual knowledge, alleging that theatre provides a key to unlocking more understanding.

Other responses dealt with theatre as a life path, a journey of personal discovery. Alejandro said, "For me [theatre] has been a school of life, ... a vision of what is further on, of why: it fills my empty voids. I believe that it is a type of Tao, something mystical inside all the spheres that human beings can create." The language here is grand, giving theatre

¹ Theatrical theorists, Grotowski and Artaud often applied metaphysical language to theatre. Artaud spoke of a "theatre of suffering," while Grotowski sought the creation of "the holy actor" through a system of training that he devised. The "holy actor" is one who sacrifices and purifies himself on the altar of his work, stripping down layers of falsehood and fear by submitting himself to rigorous physical exercises and vocal training.

incredible power to guide, to inspire, to fulfill. Furthermore, Alejandro applies the term “school of life” to his artistic philosophy, adding a pedagogical element to his interest in theatre. It is a sentiment that I heard echoed frequently.

Using theatre as an instructional device is one that spans theatrical history, from Greek tragedy to the morality plays of medieval times and into the present day. It is an aspect that compels these students. And beyond the idea that theatre can be an instrument of learning for the actor on a personal level, there is also a desire to instruct the audience. In his definition of theatre, Yonel told me: “I want people to be better, to reflect, and to feel human. I am very happy when I manage to touch the interior world of the people.”

The Independent Project

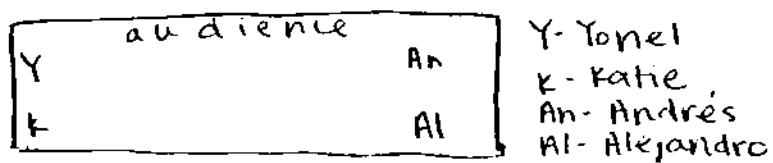
The first day I spent with Alejandro, Yonel, and Andrés at the INC, they introduced me to a project they were working on. Yonel explained it as “a performance of theatre and dance,” an experimental original creation, themed around violence. I came to learn that it was a completely independent project, not for class, and not necessarily to ever perform publicly. Rather, they were a group of students gathering together to exchange ideas and to apply their training. Unfortunately, due to the time limitations of field school, I was only able to participate in part of the process. Though what we made together was incomplete, the rehearsals that I attended for the creation of this experimental presentation gave me perhaps the greatest insights regarding the practical application of their ideas to the stage. I was able to observe how they employ their theoretical framework in the context of actual performance.

For three days, I came to the INC, and we retreated to a secluded room to rehearse. I brought with me a poem they had asked me to memorize, “Una temporada en el infierno” by Arturd Rimbaud translated from the French. The rehearsal process took place out of

chronological order: we would create one moment or another, and then move on. It was as if we were building a palette of available material—and in the end, we would take a little from here and a little from there, and compile a completed work.

My first rehearsal was in an empty classroom with desks shoved up against the wall to clear an open playing space. We went over the first section of the poem by Rimbaud: “Yo, yo que me considere angel o mago, dispensado de total moral, soy restituido a la tierra, con un deber que hay que buscar.” The diction suggests a darkness and a metaphysical tone that coincides with the ideas of the presentation, as well as with the overarching artistic philosophy that governed it. The next part of the rehearsal dealt with dance. I was interested to note that the choreography was not necessarily rhythmical. It was set to a dark bit of music in English, and it was based on shape as opposed to counts. Alejandro taught me movements that were quick, strong, and sharp.

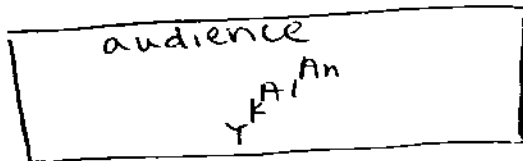
The next day of rehearsal further demonstrated the care that went into this creation. The previous day they had taught me already-choreographed movements and helped me with the pronunciation of poetry. On June 26th, Yonel told me, “We are going to make some work today, but we do not know yet what it is.” I started to observe and participate in the creative process of the project. It began with Yonel and Alejandro arguing over the most effective way to begin the piece. I was struck by their concern for detail. Every moment seemed infinitely important, every step or entrance, because it contributed in some way to the storytelling. The following excerpt from my field notes describes the opening sequence as it was finally decided upon:



“We enter, backs to each other, walking backwards, at different physical levels. I am crouched at a medium position. We take four steps, slow, looking around us, heads darting,

eyes darting—suspicion. All suddenly turn inward—a beat while we make eye contact. Turn back. Four more slow, suspicious steps—sudden turn.”

The movement was intended to generate an atmosphere of tension and fear. It began slowly, erupted for a moment, and then simmered. My field notes continue: “Upon the turn, we walk slowly—melt—to create the following formation:



“There is a beat, and suddenly we have formed our first shape.

“Alejandro stresses to me the importance of lightning-quick movements—he says that one moment we should be in one position, and the next moment in a new shape.” We formed a picture of violence: I pantomimed slitting Andres’ throat, while Yonel crouched off his Stage Left side about to beat him or pounce. Alejandro pantomimed reaching into his pocket on his Stage Right side, robbing him. The shape was very literal in its representation of a violent act. Its violence, coupled with the speed and control we used to arrive at it, were intended to produce a somewhat shocking visual image for the audience.

Upon the next beat, we took a defensive shape, like we were shielding ourselves from violence. I recorded, “I am crouched close to the ground, my legs stretched out, and my hands spread near my face as if protecting it or deflecting blows.

“The next shape has me curled tightly into a ball on my haunches, my left hand across my knees, and my right hand on the crown of my head, fingers curled, my arm covering my face.” Yonel, Alejandro and Andrés surrounded me in a threatening position. It was at this point that we began to incorporate text with the movement. We called upon the poem that we had rehearsed the day before. I suggested that I speak some of the text myself, and that they join me on some lines. My field notes document: “The end result has me rising slowly, vocalizing only the word ‘Yo,’ tensing my arms around my body and each other. I find a

focal point... on a diagonal... and relax my arms. Then I begin to speak the text of the poem ... On certain lines, Yonel, Alejandro, and Andrés whisper or speak the text with me. Though my back is turned, and I am 'focused on the light,' I know that behind me, they are moving, creating shapes with their bodies.”

The theoretical implications of this undertaking are extensive. First of all, its very nature as an independent project demonstrates their dedication to pursuing art for its own sake. I thought it was strange that they would do so much work outside of assigned class work, and asked them when and for whom it would be performed. They thought it was strange that I would even think to pose such a question. In fact, much of the feedback I received mentioned independent projects as one of the most cherished aspects of their education at the theatre school. Mònica said, “For me, the most valuable part of school is being able to create individual works with my peers, or theatrical groups, that have not been given to us by a professor. That is the most important—to be able to exchange ideas with them.”

Further, the nature of the presentation coincides directly with the language they use to describe their artistic philosophy. As opposed to realism, which demands a set script, storyline, and certain style of acting, the work here is very symbolic and stylized. It relies on visual stimulation like dance and shape, as well as heightened poetic language, to convey the story to the audience. But the story does not have a traditional plotline, with exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and denouement. It is more visceral, building emotionally and carrying the audience away on a journey of the senses. Like music, it seeks to appeal on a level beyond intellect, forming a response that digs down to pure human emotion—even touching the soul.

Aspirations for the Future

The passion that I observed in these students prompted me to inquire as to their goals for the future. Like their responses about what theatre meant to them, their ideas were often theoretical. Though most expressed desires to pursue a professional theatrical career, they frequently had no concrete plans in mind.

Alejandro told me, "My desires in general are to grow in what I have dedicated myself, and to grow in many more art forms like music, painting, poetry, etc. My personal desires are to develop myself and strengthen my spirit and body." Here growth in art, as opposed to the pursuit of any one career or vocation, is emphasized. Charles Michel Riatigere, 23-year-old student in his second year at the school had this to say: "My major desire in theatre is for actors to be recognized for their talent, creativity, and for work that achieves passion." This response seeks a general, idealistic sort of change for actors throughout an entire culture as opposed to focusing on his own desires for a future in theatre.

Those who responded with more concrete plans, including traveling and opening their own theatre companies, acknowledged that their dreams were somewhat fanciful due to a lack of financial resources. In fact, everyone I interviewed mentioned economic factors as one of their major obstacles. Yonel: "... If one desires to make a living from art, one has to have another way of sustaining oneself economically because theatre is not profitable. The greatest difficulty that I see is the economic factor."

Alejandro: "The obstacles are primarily economic. ... The value that is given to acting is minimal, the amount that people are willing to pay is very small."

Mónica: "The obstacles that I perceive are the lack of money for continuing study, that the career isn't profitable. ... I believe that the Peruvian artist has a great desire to advance and to live theatre, something that isn't valued in this country. He is an artist that

has suffered and continues to suffer, and tries to improve himself. In Peru, there are exceptional groups, exceptional directors, exceptional dramaturges that should be recognized, but they aren't given recompense."

Conclusion

As it stands, there is still much to learn. Future study could be devoted to truly understanding the job market for theatrical artists in Peru. Due to my language limitations, I was unable to ask questions regarding the origins of their artistic philosophies. I wonder if these metaphysical ideas evolved independently, or if the students are familiar with the works of theorists like Grotowski and Artaud and use them as a foundation for their training. I would like to speak to theatre instructors and find out what led them to teach theatre, what kind of background they have, and if the students' theoretical viewpoints mirror their own.

My experience with theatre students in Trujillo threw me headlong into a world of theatrical theory and training with which I had been previously unfamiliar. I remain moved by the passion that informs their work and the depth of their commitment to theatrical art. My personal artistic philosophy differs somewhat from that which I observed here: I pursue theatre because I love it, because I believe it capable of expressing profound truth, and because it is a whole lot of fun. I think my approach to theatre is a little more light-hearted, and, consequently, a little less passionate.

When asked, "why on earth are you pursuing theatre?" an aspiring U.S. actor will often say: "I want to get trained, get work, and make a living doing what I love." I have heard myself give that answer on numerous occasions. Such a response implies an emphasis on financial stability: personally, I know already that if I can't make a living acting, I will likely give it up. What I heard in Peru reflected their motivations for pursuing theatre as a life course as opposed to just a job. Indeed, art is life.

It is possible that the metaphysical approach to theatre may be based at least somewhat on financial necessity—because here it is all about passion, it is about a love of art—it is a sacrifice. These students recognize that by seeking a life in theatre ^{they} may well be relegating themselves to a life of poverty. Yet they pursue it anyway, because it serves as a foundation for the way they have defined themselves and the world around them. Art is life because it has to be.