



Revista de Artes Performativas, Educación y Sociedad

Número

4

Volumen 2

2020

Revista de Artes Performativas, Educación y Sociedad

RevistaAPES

Volumen 2, Número 4, 2020

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ISSN 2659-594X

Editado en Gijón, Asturias, España

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2020

Revista semestral

<https://www.congresoexctd.com/revista>

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Sumario

Editorial. Revista APES nº 4	5
Teatro PUENTE: Intento de eliminar la marginación. <i>Lina de Guevara</i>	9
PUENTE Theatre: Attempting to overcome marginalization. <i>Lina de Guevara</i>	13
Emprender en cultura en tiempos de pandemia. Siendo mujer y mamá. <i>Carmela Romero</i> ..	17
Trobada docents – Teatre online. “Experiències compartides sobre la docència teatral online” / Encuentro de docentes – Teatro online. “Experiencias compartidas sobre la docencia teatral online”. <i>Marta Fíguls, Ana Pérez, Fuensanta Onrubia, Alicia Rabadán</i>	21
Entrevista a Héctor Aristizabal	25
Entrevista a Esther Uria Iriarte	33
Reseña de libro “12 vidas”, de VV. AA. <i>Natí Villar Caño</i>	41

PUENTE Theatre: Attempting to overcome marginalization

Teatro PUENTE: Intento de eliminar la marginación

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Para referenciar: de Guevara, Lina. (2020). PUENTE Theatre: Attempting to overcome marginalization. *Revista de Artes Performativas, Educación y Sociedad*, 2(4), 13-16

ABSTRACT: This article tells how Puente Theatre has used theatrical tools to diminish or eliminate immigrants' marginalisation.

In 1988, Lina de Guevara, a Chilean actress and theatre teacher, founded PUENTE Theatre in Victoria BC. (Canada) to narrate immigrants' experiences coming to Canada from Latin America. This theatre is still in operation today, and its work has been warmly welcomed by immigrants from different countries and by former residents of Canada. The plays that PUENTE presents express what it means to leave one's country of origin and create understanding, solidarity, and, sometimes, admiration. This type of theatre proves to be an excellent tool to diminish marginalisation and loneliness. It is also useful to share, with new compatriots, the contributions made by the variety of cultures present in Canada today.

RESUMEN: En este artículo se narra cómo el Teatro Puente ha utilizado instrumentos teatrales para disminuir o eliminar la marginación de los inmigrantes

El teatro PUENTE fue fundado en Victoria BC. (Canadá) en 1988 por Lina de Guevara, chilena, actriz y profesora de Teatro, con el propósito de narrar las experiencias de inmigrantes, llegados a Canadá desde Latinoamérica. Este teatro sigue en funcionamiento hoy en día y su trabajo ha sido muy bienvenido por inmigrantes de diferentes países y también por los antiguos residentes de Canadá. Las obras que PUENTE presenta expresan lo que significa dejar el país de origen y crean comprensión, solidaridad y, a veces, admiración. El teatro manifiesta ser un instrumento excelente para disminuir la marginación y la soledad, y compartir, con los nuevos compatriotas, los aportes hechos por la variedad de culturas presentes en Canadá actualmente.

Note: The present English version is the original article, whose Spanish version has been revised by the author, respecting its content, with some formal differences and additions.

Nota: La presente versión en inglés es el artículo original, cuya versión en castellano ha sido revisada por la propia autora respetando su contenido, con algunas diferencias formales y ampliaciones.

I'm going to talk about a personal experience of marginalization.

First I want you to do a little imagination exercise. Please try to visualize the map of the world. If you are like me, you will probably see a Mercator projection, where Latin America is to the left, the Atlantic Ocean in the centre, North America and Europe on top, the Southern hemisphere down. Chile has a marginalized position, almost coming out of the map, down in a corner. I think the only other country that has a worst position is Australia, down and under. This is the image of our position in the world that I grew up with, marginalized, at the side, far away. Now I know that there attempts are made to correct this vision, some maps have the Pacific Ocean in the center, others have the South Pole on top, there's an attempt to have other perspectives. But I think that still the Mercator Projection is very prevalent, and you can check that up in yourselves, and see what image appears in your own head when you think about the world. Images are important when you're searching for an identity. So I grew up thinking that I belonged to a country that was far from the great important centers of culture where everything was happening, we even had a big cordillera that separated us from the rest of the world like a wall. But I felt contented in this world. I related so much to the Leopardi's poem that Doctor Rossi mentioned yesterday:

*Always dear to me was this secluded hill,
and this hedge, which from so great a
part of the farthest horizon excludes my
view.*

As a member of an educated middle class with certain privileges I did not feel marginal in my own country.

This situation certainly changed when I became an immigrant and had to move to Canada. Everything changed at that time. I was no longer in the center of my world but at the edge of it, marginalized by the language, by the lack of a shared history and culture, even by my profession as a theatre actor and director. Theatre in itself is a place at the edge. What worried me the most was the fact that everything that most people here knew about Chile was the worst. Everybody knew about the military coup, the dictatorship, the killings and the torture. I remember looking in the Camosun College Library for books about Chile and they all started on 1973 with studies of the Chilean Military coup. The mainstream chose what it wanted to know about us. I felt that nobody knew about the good things we had, our contributions to the world in all kinds of fields.

Another shock I received was looking in the Library, I think this was in the University of Toronto, in the catalogue under American. I was looking for books about the history of different Latin American countries and could

only find books about the United States. I felt then not only marginalized but disappeared. We were catalogued under "Hispanic American". I felt I was being defined from the outside and I rebelled against that. I think this feeling is shared by all immigrants. So I started to search for ways of correcting this and of course my way was the theatre, which has always been my profession. And this was why I founded PUENTE Theatre: to tell the stories of immigrants to Canada from Latin America, so that the rest of Canadian society could hear our own voices, instead of being interpreted and defined by somebody else. We started with a play about Latin American immigrant women, called "I wasn't born here", followed by a play about Latin American immigrant men, a musical called "Crossing Borders". Then we did a play about the Immigrant couple, called "Canadian Tango". And so on and on, we explored the immigrant experience from many angles. At one point we started to include the experiences from other cultures too, and PUENTE became a multi-cultural theatre, not only Latin American. But then we felt this wasn't enough. We were telling our stories from the moment we arrived here, but what about sharing our culture, our Latin American theatre, so rich, so exciting, so different! And sharing it alive, not only as a text but as an experience. This was very difficult. For many years I tried to convince theatre groups in Victoria to put on plays written originally in Spanish. I searched for the right translations (very difficult to find) and the right topics. I tried to overcome the fears of artistic directors about doing plays from alien cultures that hadn't been tried previously in New York or Toronto. It is understandable. The theatre is such a risky profession, it has such a precarious life in our society that it is very costly to make a mistake when choosing a repertoire. I organized readings of García Lorca's plays but they were deemed too "strange", too apart, only for an elite. At the end I realized that if we wanted to do this we would really have to do it ourselves. And so PUENTE started doing two things: When possible staging plays from Spanish speaking countries, and doing Play Readings where we included all the cultures that have wonderful theatre and that you will possibly never see here on stage: To this date we have produced staged readings of about twenty plays from countries such as Nigeria, Cameroon, Japan, Italy, Holland and

Lithuania. Some Latin American authors that we have included here have been Jaime Silva with "The dark Night of Marguerite de Roberval" and Carlos Cerda with "Something in the Air". This last play was produced in Toronto by the TWP. It is easier to get Latin American plays produced in the big cities, where you can be sure of a larger audience.

But of course, the most satisfactory project is to fully produce a play. The first one we chose was from Spain: "The House of Bernarda Alba" by Federico García Lorca.. This production was done in partnership with Full Spectrum Society, another Victoria Theatre organization. It was an exciting experience of cross cultural communication for the whole cast. We worked hard with the translation, finding the music, finding the adequate gestures, understanding that world of rural Spain in the early thirties, trying not to lose the poetry of the words, of the imagery. I think it was enriching for everybody, actors and audience.

Our next production of this kind was "Evita and Victoria" by Argentinian Monica Ottino. It was the year Madonna had produced her musical "Evita", her own interpretation of a very complex Argentinian phenomenon: the ascent to enormous power of a woman such as Eva Duarte. I felt I really wanted to allow an Argentinian author to have a say, to let a few people here in Victoria to hear what her interpretation was, as somebody who had lived this history in her blood, and was not just using it for effect. This production was again a very rewarding exercise. The play tells the story of an imaginary meeting between Eva Peron and Victoria Ocampo, an Argentinian aristocratic intellectual, and also a very powerful woman. We had to adapt the text and add scenes that would explain the historical background to Canadian audiences. We worked with full support of the author.

Our latest venture into overcoming marginalization by trying to bring Latin American theatre to the Victoria audiences, is our production of "Letters for Tomas" by Chilean Malucha Pinto that premiered in April at the Belfry Studio, and which we are presenting again on November 2. This play, the story of a mother of a profoundly disabled child, has a universal theme. Here we did not have to adapt or explain anything: the play speaks directly to all human beings. We have kept the form, the style, the Latin American magic

realism; in some moments, Spanish is spoken. The music encompasses a variety of Latin American rhythms and instruments.

One wonderful aspect of this production was the fact that the author, Malucha Pinto, was able to travel from Chile to attend the opening night, and we could share her, and her outstanding personality with the Victorian audience. And she was able to tell us what she felt when she saw this reincarnation of her play that had had already a year of performances in Chile, and that here in Victoria it was performed in English for the first time.

Years have gone by and we must add the names of more productions of Latin American and Spanish plays presented by PUENTE Theatre: the Mexican "The woman who fell from the Sky" by Hugo Rascon Banda, about the fate of a Tarahumara women found lost in a US city, and the Chilean play: "The pilgrimage of the nuns of Concepción" by Jaime Silva, both directed by Lina de Guevara. In this way the record of PUENTE productions of Latin American plays becomes updated up to 2011, the year I retired and Mercedes

Batiz Bennet became Artistic director of PUENTE and carries on this work.

Our productions were usually performed for short seasons, and so, they were not seen by large audiences. But the attempt was made, the precedent set, we are not so far away anymore, not so much at the edge. The opportunity is there for all, to see and to experience Latin American theatre in local productions. Because they are produced here, they received a new life, a new language, a new meaning. It is a powerful mixture that includes the actors, many of whom are Canadian born and have never even visited Latin America, the author, the director, the translator, the musician, everybody bringing the best they have to give life to this new product that they all understand deeply, viscerally, because it is about human feelings that transcend any artificial marginalization. By trying to overcome marginalization I feel we're embarked in a journey that can only have positive repercussions for all of us.