



## Decolonizing the body with Teatro Trono

*Iván Nogales* (Translation: Katherine Arp)

My work and personal life is driven by the immeasurable enthusiasm to try and ensure that theatre 'touches' all kinds of bodies. I wanted to share the transformation that theatre had caused in me and given my whole environment the chance to engage in this strong and special physical practice. I'd gained experiences with miners, peasants, adolescents and Aymara women<sup>1</sup> and deliberately wanted to work with 'street children' as an experiment. I never assumed that this offer would become so powerful.

I started working in a state-run rehabilitation center for minors in 1989, where about 100 children were locked up for minor criminal acts like robbery or alcohol and drug consumption. The city's image was freed of the offence 'street children'. The center's tasks, making possible a reintegration for the children or offering therapeutically treatment, were not fulfilled. There was not enough financing, personal nor capacity, so that the place practically was a prison. I tried to win back these children's trust with play and imagination — in the beginning pretty much against the center's politics, which had no space for art. I thought that I could help them in this way to free themselves from material and spiritual conditioning under which they were living. Like the Don Quixote<sup>2</sup> we all have inside, I left my comfortable life and went outside, fighting against the ruling psychological understanding at the center. Because the only thing they did was the destruction of the only and most valuable talent of the children: their imagination and joy – thus their fantasy; which people are so afraid of. Military education, unification and regulation of their behavior should strengthen their personality. The children were treated as prisoners. Instead, we said the children were victims of poverty. With theater, they could discover aspects of themselves playfully and develop their personalities. Fantasy



does not bring disorder in the world, but organizes it in a better way. Fantasy can be harder than punishment, because it shows the contrast to harsh reality clearer. Fantasy is the distance you go to see better. The psychologists told me, not without their reasons, that I was crazy.

My job consisted in the permanent exercise to make the children imagine all possible and impossible worlds. I painted a line on the floor with chalk and said to the children that on the other side of the line a whole different world existed where we could invent whatever we wanted. This is theater: a room of a few meters where everything is possible. It is the past, the present, the future; we are beings from here or from wherever we want to be. It is a play; a cloth might be the coat of a beggar or a king. These worlds became ours and we nourish them with our wishes. In the meantime fantasy fulfilled its function to heal and wake up. The recovery happened immediately, at once. This allowed me at first to take the children for a walk on the streets on Sundays, then for a tour all over Bolivia, another one to Peru where we performed theater. And after a while, on Christmas 1991, I could take seven of the children (between 12 and 16 years) to a room in El Alto to live together in 18 square meters. We performed theater on the streets to earn our food — our only income.

These children had given the center for minors the name *trono* — throne, which according to the verb *tronar* also meant to *destroy something* and at the same time *sitting on a throne* as kings in a penal institution, with a bed and food gratis. As we were searching for a name for the theater group, a boy said: "Iván, you read us a poem where it said that the real kings of fantasy are the children, so it's us." That is how we gave the fateful name a more poetic meaning. It was the starting signal for a seven-year poetic madness in which we tried obsessively to lay the base for an independent durable theater group of the masses<sup>3</sup>. Such a group did not exist yet in the country and I gave myself to this task with unrestrained passion, working 24 hours a day for it. For the children, there were conflicts between the theater and their own life, between the police and the relapses into the innocence of glue and alcohol. Anyway, the seven children started to be actors of their own lives. After seven uninterrupted years, each made their way whilst other children arrived. They, the first group, the founders, made their lives. The majority reached the place they wanted to or at least gave their lives the name they wanted.

From the beginning *Throne* was understood as a theater of the masses. This definition was for the eight *Alteños*<sup>4</sup> that we were, who created theater from our lives, which was more than enough. Besides, it was necessary and politically effective and offered enough identification with the longing of the working class and their historical aim — socialism. Mainly it meant: Theater of the people, from the people, with the people and for the people. We worked according to that, neither as visitors, nor as artists that observe the people to develop their pieces of art, but as a part of the community. We began to work on the memory of the community with the participation and permission of the neighborhood – until the point where we stopped being masters over our own bodies. We called it the 'theatralization of the collective memory'. This collective memory, which we are, from which we nourish ourselves, permitted us to work with real life, to create kind of a documentation theater.

Our daily dealing with the body of the people revealed a big problem: This body that we are – be it the the individual or the collective – is a humiliated body by the *other* memory and the *other* body, that of the colonizers of these lands and people who told us that we are ugly and deformed, black and dirty and that we had no souls, with the aim to make us bow to their intentions. The denial



of the body is the most rentable business. From the explicit denial in war, the collective murder, until the bombing with commercials to domesticate the body and create artificial needs. Already Domitila Chungara<sup>5</sup> said that the biggest enemy of the oppressed is not the military, but fear. And there is no worse fear than shame about oneself. We Bolivians are feared bodies, bodies held captive by fear<sup>6</sup>. We need the decolonization of the body: there is a cult of reason, which is the first imbalance of humanity. We are more mind than the rest of our body. We have to search for a return to our body, a physical collective democracy, because the first community is our body. The decolonization of the body is a necessary dimension to work on not just for our theater group of Aymaras in El Alto, but for the people in the whole world which, nearly all, are conditioned by industrial practices of clothing, of eating, of birth and of life, living distantly from one's own systems of belief, climate and tradition and from their fantasy and freedom.

*Teatro Trono* is probably the Bolivian theater group with the most national and international shows of all times. We worked with more than 5000 children, have a house in El Alto, projects in other cities and a mobile theater bus. Besides, *Throne* partakes in an eventful, intense and very fruitful exchange with the exterior, which permits us a lively dialogue and cultural communication. The 'village of the



creative' is now our most ambitious project that we brought on the way. Together with Aymaras, Afrobolivians, our artist community Compa and Teatro Trono we are creating a place to live together to cultivate community art, wisdom and joy.

### Notes

1. The Aymara are the biggest ethnic group in the Bolivian Andean area of La Paz and El Alto. My family and I are Aymara.
2. The character of Miguel de Cervantes' novel Don Quijote invented adventures in his madness, which we can still talk about. Only his craziness allowed him to do things outside the normal.
3. The Spanish word popularly refers to the lower classes of society, which are affected negatively by (post-) colonial structures. It is about the mass of the people, indigenous, peasants, workers and poor.
4. Inhabitants of El Alto, the big natural space of action. At 4000 meters height the city La Paz, the political capital of Bolivia, is crowned by her daughter El Alto, our city of birth, which currently is the ideological capital of Bolivia.
5. Domitila Chungara (1937–2012) was a Bolivian worker's and human rights activist who contributed to the end of the military dictatorships with a hunger strike of housewives.
6. Also the white, who so much reject the indigenous that they fear to be confused with (or discovered) any feature, behavior or any indigenous characteristic.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Iván Nogales* is Bolivian and studied sociology. He has developed different initiatives in the field of community theatre and education since 1980. He has worked with peasants, miners, migrant women and street children. Based on these experiences, in 1989, he founded the Community of Art Producers, which is the base for Throne Theater.