

The “Sister/Strangers” Community Play: A Celebration of Immigrant Women’s Experiences And Achievements

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ABSTRACT

This is a powerful account of the creative energy of a community of immigrant women engaged in the production of the community play "Sister/Strangers". The director, Lina de Guevara, discusses the collaborative nature of this form of theatre and its power to transform and create hope.

RÉSUMÉ

Un récit dramatique soulignant l'esprit créateur d'une communauté de femmes immigrantes participant à la production d'une pièce de théâtre intitulée "Sisters/Strangers". Responsable de la mise en scène, Lina de Guevara, souligne l'aspect collaboratif de ce genre de théâtre et sa capacité de transformer et d'engendrer l'espérance.

Lina de Guevara is the founder and artistic director of PUENTE THEATRE. She is an actor, director and writer, originally from Chile, where she received her professional training. Her most recent production, "Sisters/Strangers", is a play about the community of immigrant women from the Victoria and Vancouver area. The staging of "Sisters/Strangers" was a collaboration between theatre professionals, who were themselves immigrant women, and immigrant women who contributed to the play as generators of ideas and stories, as well as props and mask makers, designers, publicists and actors.

When I came to Canada I didn't have the language, I didn't know the culture or the theatre of Canada. All this was alien to me. I went through a dislocation, a very difficult period. I wanted to express that experience and I had this idea of working with other women that had gone through similar experiences. To do this, I started PUENTE Theatre in 1988. Our first play was called "I wasn't born here", about immigrant women from Latin America. The response of the audience was wonderful. The women in the play were not actors. There were five women and four of them didn't have any training in the arts, and the fifth was a woman who had studied visual arts. But their need to tell their own story was very strong, and they studied, rehearsed and worked very hard to be able to perform in the play. When



Lina de Guevara, Founder and Artistic Director of Puente Theatre. Photo by Lawrence McLagan.

you see an immigrant woman on stage sharing her story, in her own words, that is so moving! Sometimes working with professional actors, I miss the emotional depth that non-actors can provide. Actors are "acting", these women were "re-living" their experience!

I think there is an important place for everybody in the arts, not only for those who make a living at it. I get upset by this idea that only a few "selected" can be artists and all the rest of us are passive spectators. In other times, everybody did artistic activities in every household. People carved and painted and danced and sang. That was the way people entertained each other and amused themselves.

And now we are becoming less and less able to do that. It is not part of our daily life anymore. That is a great loss. People need to be listened to and to be seen. I am very interested in doing work that enables self-expression, for everybody. What you have to do is find out what people can do and then basically build on that. If I am working with someone who cannot stand on their head, why should I tell them to do that on stage, they would surely fail. Maybe that person can stand beautifully on one leg! I'm saying that you have to develop each person's unique skills and abilities. It is really common to find the attitude of "You can't dance, you need twenty years of training to stand on your toes and dance!" You can dance without standing on

your toes, you can find your own way of dancing, or acting or doing any other form of art.

For the play "Sisters Strangers" I met with other immigrant women and told them what I wanted to do and we started to organize the workshops, the interviews, the readings of the play in progress and other activities. About 50 women were part of that process. Some came to every workshop, others just one or two, but they all added to the creation of the play. For a period of seven months we were doing one workshop a month, in the Victoria and Vancouver area to generate stories. You cannot demand too much time, because women have jobs and their families. So we had one workshop a month on different topics. One was on music, another on visual arts, movement, story telling, mask making, acting and so on. It was really very exciting to see so many women attend the workshops. They were so involved, so focussed. The masks they made were really exceptional. Many women didn't necessarily have the expertise, the skill to do what was asked, but because their need to express themselves was so strong, they learned what they needed in order to express themselves. It is important for instructors to understand that and to be able to facilitate that. We were lucky to have very gifted instructors. And they found it rewarding too because the quality of the work was so extraordinary. I find that very exciting: the idea of having a community of women come out on stage to tell their own story!

The main thing you could feel in every workshop was the level of emotional commitment that all the women had when expressing themselves. Everybody felt very deeply: this was not entertainment, it was not

a way to "pass the time". It was a profound experience. This is something that is characteristic of the "community play" form. The play is an expression of the community, but an expression of something very important to them. Usually an issue is at the core of the community play. In the case of "Sister/Strangers", the issue was identity and reaffirmation of that identity. Because of the uprooting that happens when you become an immigrant, that identity gets lost. The women in the play needed to re-establish their identity, express this process using theatrical means, and share it with mainstream society.

The participants in "Sisters/Strangers" were from every continent and many countries: Spain, Tanzania, Denmark, El Salvador, Lebanon, Japan, Columbia, Ethiopia, and so on, a wide variety of cultures. Just to see that on stage was exciting! There were no auditions, if you wanted to be in the play, you were in, you just had to show up for rehearsals. It was up to the professionals involved, the writer, the director, to find you an appropriate role.

"Sisters/Strangers" had a core of five professional actors, also immigrant women. They were all from Vancouver. It is difficult to find professional actresses who were immigrants in Victoria. When actresses immigrate they tend to locate in a big city. In some cases, becoming an immigrant separates them from theatre. I met some fantastic actresses from the former Yugoslavia. One of them said to me quite clearly: "I cannot continue in theatre. I need to make a living". She had already found a job as a saleslady and she couldn't give it up, because the job with PUENTE was just a temporary one. The other actress was completely in shock because of the

loss of language and by the trauma she had gone through in her country. It was too difficult to concentrate on acting in a play without knowing the language. She had been a star in her country and now she felt humiliated fearing that she was not going to be able to do a good job here. That's what it was like for me when I first arrived here. I felt it was very difficult to act in another language. You go through such a dislocation.

I have done a lot with "image theatre" which is one of the techniques of what is called "Theatre of the Oppressed" developed by Augusto Boal. In image theatre you create, with your body and that of others, images of oppression, and then try to discover ways of solving or lessening the oppression, of advancing towards being free of oppression. It is interesting and very telling because you are creating an image of your own oppression and then, without explaining it, you ask the audience what they see in that image, and, of course, they see in it things that have to do with their own lives, with their own experiences. The image suggests different things to different people. One image awakens in an audience many, many other images and feelings so it becomes a very rich experience for everybody. It is not just limited to a single point of view, it is quite open. In "image theatre" workshops you very quickly reach the level of intimacy that we had in the workshop at the Praxis♀Nexus conference. In "Theatre of the Oppressed", there are all sorts of enabling techniques with which you discover what people's concerns are and to express them in an artistic way. I think it is very important to uncover and name oppressions because they confine you and limit your potential. And also it is important to establish

that you have right to be happy. Because you have a right to be happy, you have the courage to fight for your own happiness.

Another aspect I like about image theatre is that it is an avenue for people who are not very coherent or who maybe do not speak English very well. They can express themselves through the images. And this process is very democratic. Through questions you ask for everybody's input. As a facilitator you must not impose your own point of view because that would be oppressive. It is amazing how easy it is to fall into that. The more you can stop yourself from intervening the better it is. I think image theatre is very empowering and not dogmatic.

"Sister Strangers" was transformative because it reaffirms "hope". I am always struggling not to give up hope. I think we have so many objective reasons to give up hope and get into a very pessimistic attitude. And then you witness something like what happened with the play that is absolutely wonderful and life affirming. It gives you such energy. Every rehearsal with the community of women left me feeling absolutely "high". Those women were giving so much in a talented way. The talent! We made a 25 meter long banner for the play. It was made partly in my kitchen and partly in the designer Maureen Mackintosh's kitchen. Each woman took on a panel of the banner and put in whatever they wanted to say about their immigrant experience. The women would be working there until twelve o'clock at night, ironing and cutting cloth. It was interesting to see that people were not chatting, we didn't have time for tea breaks or anything like that. Everyone was so focused on the work, there was such "from the gut" feeling.



“Sisters/Strangers” participants - Dafne Sagatue, Romina Miranda and Piedad Escobar.

Photo by Lawrence McLagan.

And they put such care in their work. If it wasn't exactly what they wanted they would do it over and over again, until it was just right. It was extraordinary. It was a privilege to be part of that experience.

After the last performance we had a final circle. We all came together and people talked about what the play had meant for them. There were some tears, very powerful feelings. One woman in the group who was from Lebanon, she had seen her home destroyed several times during sixteen years of war, she said: "For six years I have lived like a crazy woman and now I feel healthy again." I think

this is very special and it has renewed my belief in the transformative power of theatre.

ENDNOTE

1. This personal narrative by Lina de Guevara was recorded and edited by Helene Demers.