

Illuminating Performances:
Producing the Film *Acting Together on the World Stage*

by Allison Lund

What is witnessed can't be erased or taken back. And when an image we've taken in clashes with our sense of who we are, who we want to be, whether as individuals or society as a whole, it's our conscience that makes itself heard. – Bill Shore, founder, Share Our Strength: No Kid Hungry

I am watching a lighted stage, a woman I feel I know quite well. Her hair falls in long black braids to her waist. She recounts to the audience the atrocities committed during the Peruvian civil war during her youth: loved ones disappeared, thrown into dusty hollows by the sides of dirt roads; women raped, then forced from their ancestral villages from the shame. Ana Correa dances on stage, a dance of anguish. Her body movements are turbulent and off-balance. Her face contorts. I look into her eyes and feel that I can see the exact event she envisions, a house blowing to bits around her. She is trying to save her children.

I tap the space bar on my keyboard. The video stops. I hit the monitor's power switch and the light from the screen cuts off instantly. I sit alone in my darkened edit room, weeping. I imagine searching for my own love, not knowing, and knowing... he is gone forever. My tears roll, reflective despair, but part of this emotion wells from appreciation. I feel grateful to be in the presence of the consummate artistry of this committed actor.

My computer is host to an extraordinary community of theatre artists, like Ana, who are ready to act, and they invite my participation. As a filmmaker, I can focus a light, amplify what is heard, and having this opportunity to bear witness allows me to be part of a possible transformation. Watching these brave performances, I feel both the stinging salt and the nourishing wash of my tears: the sorrow at our ability for cruelty, and the joy that the artistic impulse inside of us rises to answer our horrors.

Bearing witness is an important prerequisite for changing oppressive conditions. I paraphrase from articles by Dr. Salomón Lerner Febres, President of Peru's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), and Dr. Cynthia Cohen, Director of the Program in Peacebuilding and the Arts at Brandeis University, to discuss the role of art in bearing witness to injustice and thus providing a step toward righting injustice.

To say that something is unimaginable, unspeakable cannot allow us to look away from it, to deny and forget it. As many in positions of power admonish too soon, "Let us move on." Art helps us to see and acknowledge events and complicated truths. In researching sexual violence during the civil war of the 1980s, and as a continuation of Peru's TRC of 2001-2003, Ana Correa and her troupe, *Grupo Cultural Yuyachkani*, searched for women who were evicted from their villages (sometimes pregnant by their perpetrators) and found groups of *campesinas* living in the anonymity of city convents. They had been cast from the vibrancy of community, forced to exist *unseen*.

In areas where rape is a weapon of warfare, the human capacity for ill and society's shame are present in the bodies of the women violated. We often would rather conceal them than confront the truths to which their presence attests. Art can work against our desire to hide vile acts in shadowed recesses, to practice depravity and then demand that the victims be our sin-eaters.

As Roberta Levitow of Theatre Without Borders described in her interview for the film, the commitment to find these women and to offer theatre as a way to bring their stories forward was an act of justice. “That idea of peacebuilding equals capacitiz-ing a society, giving a society a reflection of themselves... An artwork can endow the citizens of a society with a sense of self because just seeing yourself represented on stage is so dignifying.”

This act of perception relates to sensory experience and is an important factor in facing oppression. A fully effective response to violence cannot be intellectual, political, or legal only, it needs to involve work in the realm of feelings, emotions. In accessing the visual and auditory dimensions of injury, the artist speaks to the senses. In specific contradiction to violence, art honors the senses.

A group of women in Lima agreed to share stories with Ana and work with her to develop a play based on their backgrounds. Ana began the process with performance exercises used to warm up, to connect with breath and body. She discovered that most of the women were deeply disconnected from their sensual selves. She had made the assumption that, like herself, they could access positive emotions through corporal expression. Ana re-evaluated and recognized that her first focus as a theatre artist, should be to provide an opportunity for the women to find their bodies again in terms of creativity and pleasure and not in terms of violence and pain.

An editorial comment on this issue: many in this field of art are asked to document the effectiveness of their work over and over on forms and in formats often antithetical to what actually takes place. Time-lines must be defined, deadlines met, and Ana's period of observing and honoring the real needs of program members might not have qualified as funding-worthy, though it evidenced principled action by respecting the participants' severe alienation from their own bodies before any requests were made of them to share their experiences.

The artist bears respectful witness to both the subject who is asked to offer up her story and the audience who receives it. Art can help us to look, and make this light that illuminates reality a source of support. Consider a documentary element, for instance, tapes of alleged violations of women in Libya. The brutish movements, the raw screams are important to disseminate, evaluate. We must be informed. And yet they traumatize us, numb us. They make us want to squeeze our eyes tight, calm our heartbeats in blank silence and forget. The artist portrays truth, but mediates it as well.

With the Peruvian women Ana and her sister Débora created the theatre piece called *Kay Punku*, (*This Door* in Quechua), in which the depiction of violence is stylized. It is brusque, sharp, quick. Ana holds out a trumpet straight and tense; she blares it at Débora. Débora whirls around, her skirt inflates chaotically. She recoils, draws in her arms. Her fingers hang distorted, twitching. The audience is sculpted in stillness as Débora's body twists through tortured angles. Then she stops. The sounds calm. With the long slow expansion of her lungs, a sense of presence filters back into her eyes.

After these few frenetic moments, a beautiful long stretch of *Kay Punku* dramatizes a healing ritual on stage. There is a section of video of Ana that I play over and over in which she perceives something of wonder in the distance. Her hunched shoulders straighten. Her eyes widen and lighten. Her eyes: how does she bring them from timidity to this expression that I know is rapture? I am awed at the catharsis I feel at random points in any day when I replay this piece of video, call forth this actor's miraculous craft. Both art and weapons have an impact, but art honors the senses and the integrity of the individuals impacted.

In *Ana Correa and Roberto Gutiérrez Varea: Performance Addressing Gender-based Violence*, from the *Acting Together* toolkit, theatre producer Roberto Gutiérrez Varea describes Ana's first staging of a final draft of *Kay Punku* for the women involved. The following is Roberto's description, slightly abbreviated:

"We start hearing this drumming and through one of the doors enter Ana and her sister Débora with a big drum, like that, (*expands arms to demonstrate size of drum*) and this beautiful singing. So the whole group of women enters the space drumming and singing together and that was just already a very moving moment which gives an understanding of how *Yuyachkani* works.

They were not just having the women show up to see this. They had worked with them collaboratively in a long process of workshops, and they were coming in creative celebration together, singing. Eventually, they sat, and Ana and Débora went into the performance space and transformed into their characters.

Half an hour into the piece, there was not a dry eye in the audience, and the women were passing Kleenex left and right. It was intensely touching. They finished the piece and at the end-- as a part of the performance, some rocks on stage had transformed into a basket full of oranges-- they started passing the oranges to the women and the women were passing them to us. They started carving the top of the oranges and they were inviting people to do it at the same time. So two minutes later we were all sucking on the oranges like we were children in this space together.

Afterward, they invited the women into conversation. The responses were very, very powerful of the amazement on the part of the women to see this transformation occur from this story of great pain, to acknowledgment and transformation on stage. The process, in talking to Débora and Ana, was going to continue then back into the sessions."

This respect for subject and audience in *Yuyachkani's* work shows careful attention throughout interpretation. Dr. Salomón Lerner Febres explains a related idea that, in bearing witness to injustice, the work of art has less to do with reproduction and more to do with the revelation of the meaning of what happened. The symbolism used by art to convey tragedy does not obscure, but rather lends intelligibility to truth:

"If, in a staged performance, we the audience are confronted with horror and monstrosity, with farce and comedy, these effects do not owe to a disintegration of the real but rather to the success of the actors at having revealed an area of life that was hidden. The magic of the theater does not consist, then, in an evasion, but rather in a clear and disturbing return to the facts. It is a masking that unmask us, a fiction that restores to us, whole and legible, a set of previously scattered facts."

Dr. Lerner describes how the successful formation of just societies in the wake of violence, this re-assembling of facts, is not suitably addressed through the standard arena of the legal system alone. To show an honest will to move forward in an altered manner, which is one of the truest forms of expiation, a society must acknowledge violation through the serious exploration of the conditions which allowed the oppression. Understanding and acknowledging underlying causes-- sexism, racism, nationalism-- is the basis for a re-establishing of social solidarity.

In analyzing the events of Peru's civil war, the TRC not only looked at atrocities committed, it took on the task of unveiling the structural discrimination and exclusion deeply embedded in society. One example of this cultural oppression is the practice of levying fines on birth certificates for those born at home, essentially making them too expensive to acquire. Home birth is a tradition for many in rural villages. Because birth certificates were the basis for voting documentation, indigenous people were systemically disenfranchised. Part of the great success of TRCs (which can be considered a type of performance themselves) can be to honor loss by disclosing the information that invites profound changes in the national consciousness. Dr. Lerner confirms the vital role that art plays in this intricate process:

"Because of its social import, the debt could not be met through the sentencing of the guilty nor through economic reparations to the victims alone. This debt called for the transformation of our country in a new direction, away from racism and exclusion. And that meant, importantly, work at the level of symbols, of representations, of images of ourselves from a point of view both critical and empathetic. Only then might Peru truly overcome its legacy of violence. Hence the importance for the Commission of the collaboration of one of the leading theatre companies in Peru, *Grupo Cultural Yuyachkani*."

Theatre is a collective recuperative event, creating the space for: the recovery of and equality of all voices, especially those of the oppressed, the excluded, the disappeared; a reaching to the roots of the problems, not through punishment, but through an engaged awareness of the divisions that were the root cause of violence; and commitments against denial while nurturing the healing necessary to continue forward. Roberto's story of *Kay Punku* concludes with a testament to the generative capacities of bearing witness through the artistic process:

"I saw the finished piece in Argentina and it had changed a lot. As well as acting, Ana and Débora had played the music for each other, and when I saw it in Buenos Aires, a Quechua man was the musician. It became very apparent to me that this was a very critical decision on their part and so I said, 'What's going on?' They said, 'Well, the women wanted there to be a man.'

If it was a measure of this work helping the narration of healing, it had to include an element of reconciliation with men. It was a very generous gesture, on part of the women, to say, 'No, we have to have a male presence there in creating an engagement with us again.' This is a good example, I think of how this other way of acting, not only results in such powerful theatre but that this kind of work can only result from this very careful, very creative way of developing these meaningful connections between the subject matter, the performers and the people whose stories are being represented."

Yuyachkani's productions dispel the apprehension that artistic merit and social change are conflicting objectives, and that, in theatre creation, one precludes the other. In fact, Ana shows that aesthetic values and socio-political values can be mutually reinforcing, not conflicting, commitments.

As an individual, I often feel powerless, a single flame. But in producing this film, in bearing witness to both horrendous crime and stunning ingenuity, I become part of the *powerful fire* that Polly Walker evokes at the film's conclusion. Instead of casting my eye in resignation at the greed and rampant inequalities of my world, my gaze has been uplifted by the vitality that can craft responses to these

problems, by the imagination that can inform justice seeking. These actors have shown me that when we reach for the creativity in our own minds, together we beautify the world.

I invite you to engage with the art you see all around you, to add yourself to the story, and to the change that is possible. Our voices rise in a growing community of people who affirm that a just social contract will prevail, and that we have, as irrepressible resources and guides, the arts in all their forms.

RESOURCE LIST

Bill Shore

Museum News, May/June 2005

<http://www.aam-us.org/pubs/mn/index-old.cfm>

Cynthia Cohen

Creative Approaches to Reconciliation

<http://www.brandeis.edu/ethics/peacebuildingarts/pdfs/CreativeApproaches.pdf>

Engaging With the Arts to Promote Coexistence

<http://www.brandeis.edu/ethics/peacebuildingarts/pdfs/EngagingArts.pdf>

Salomón Lerner Febres

http://www.brandeis.edu/ethics/pdfs/Memory_of_Violence_and_Drama_in_Peru_Salomon_Lerner_Febres_Just_Performance_Keynote_Brandeis_2011.pdf

Physicians for Human Rights

DEADLY DELAYS Maternal Mortality in Peru: A Rights-Based Approach to Safe Motherhood Political Participation, Especially by Rural Women

https://s3.amazonaws.com/PHR_Reports/maternal-mortality-in-peru2007.pdf

Roberta Levitow

From taped interview, *Acting Together on the World Stage*, 2007, www.actingtogether.org

Roberto Gutiérrez Varea

From taped interview, *Acting Together on the World Stage*, 2007, www.actingtogether.org

Polly Walker

From taped Interview, *Acting Together on the World Stage*, 2007, www.actingtogether.org