

Universal Mosaic of Drama and Theatre

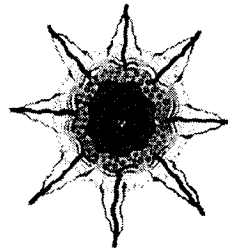
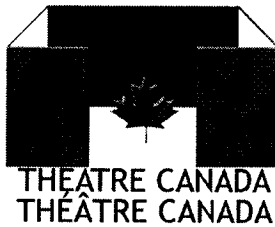
The IDEA 2004 Dialogues

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Theatre and Drama for Empowerment: The Immigrant Experience

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I'll focus on one small piece of the "Universal Mosaic of Drama": my own story and how PUENTE Theatre came about. I hope our experience can lead to some useful conclusions about empowerment and drama.

I arrived in Canada in 1976 and settled in Victoria, British Columbia, a small city of 250,000. I was already forty-three years old and had a complete adult life behind me. I had been working in theatre for many years and had an established career in my homeland. Suddenly, everything changed for me. During my first years in Canada, I felt a growing need to explain myself to my new fellow Canadians. I had lost all of my old connections. I was no longer living among people with whom I shared a past, a culture, a language, and a history. I needed to tell my fellow citizens who I was and where I came from. This was particularly important because I came from Chile, a third world country, which was known for its problems and not its successes. Most Canadians knew that Chile had undergone a bloody military coup, and had suffered under a cruel dictator, General Pinochet. Few knew that Chile had two Nobel Prize winning poets, that we had great architects and that the University of Chile was an internationally respected institution. It would be as if Canada was known in the world only by the clear cutting of its forests and abusive residential schools. Consequently, I wanted to tell my story the way I saw it. Most importantly, I did not want to be looked down upon nor did I want to be pitied - I wanted to be known and respected on my own terms. I found that this need to communicate with the mainstream was shared by many immigrants.

After spending several years of confusion, feeling stunned by the changes in my life and not knowing how to achieve the level of communication I yearned for, I realized that having worked in the theatre all my life, theatre should be my vehicle of communication. With five other women, also Latin American immigrants, we decided to create a play to tell the story of how we had become immigrants, what heartaches and losses it meant, the funny things that happened and the sad ones. We wanted to let everybody know that we were not threats or burdens, that we brought values, knowledge, and humanity to our new country.

In the late 1980s, the Federal Government provided employment training grants and we qualified for one. I cannot stress enough the importance of having sufficient time to develop a project of this kind. Usually people are supposed to do theatre "after hours", in their spare time, as if creating a play were some light hobby that doesn't deserve more than a few hours. You all know that the reality is very different. As one of the participants told me, "I have worked in many jobs: in a factory, in a laboratory, in restaurants, but never in my life have I worked as hard as when rehearsing the play." We were enormously lucky to

get proper funding that allowed us to establish strong roots. PUENTE Theatre's first play was called *I Wasn't Born Here*. The other women had no theatre experience and their intention was not to become actresses, but to reclaim the voice they had lost. They had an intense desire to tell their stories, and they were willing to learn the skills required to do this.

I Wasn't Born Here was very important for establishing PUENTE (which means "bridge" in Spanish) as a theatre company with a mandate to tell the stories of immigrants to Canada. During that first project, we developed methodologies for our research, training, and rehearsing. For people who were not actors and, in some cases, spoke very little English, it was a huge challenge to write, act in, and produce a play. But our limitations became spurs; we found creative ways of overcoming them: we used written signs when our English wasn't good enough, we found expressive images that didn't require words; we had scenes simultaneously in English and Spanish, and used props in interesting ways. As the director, I started to welcome the difficulties and obstacles. They seemed to provide a frame of reference, a springboard for our work.

I realized that with the help of an experienced director, a determined and courageous person who was not a professional actor could perform in a show that would move, entertain and enlighten the audience. When I founded that first company with women who were not actresses, I did so because in Victoria I could not find trained theatre professionals who were also Latin American immigrants. PUENTE Theatre happened by necessity, not by choice. The fact that the actors in *I Wasn't Born Here* were really immigrant women, talking with their own voices about their own lives was something that truly touched our audiences. Moreover, a door had started to open for me. When I threw myself into this experiment, I was not at all sure how well it would succeed. As a theatre professional with many years of training, I had to overcome my own resistance and my own prejudices about non-professional actors. I wondered how anyone could just come off the street and stand on stage with authority. I began to learn that a different approach was possible, and that what had seemed a hindrance could become an asset.

I Wasn't Born Here was very successful. Our audiences were moved and delighted by our stories; the Latin American community took pride in our performances and felt understood and respected. The play toured widely and was the subject of several video documentaries.

It seemed natural, after telling the story of immigrant women, to tell the story of immigrant men. A second play was created in 1990, *Crossing Borders*, a musical exploring the experiences of Latin American immigrant men. The third play, *Canadian Tango*, tried to answer the question of how immigration affected the relationship of a couple. It used Latin American ballroom dancing as a metaphor for marriage.

In all our plays we included a moment of audience participation, because we felt that it was a good way of building bridges. In *I Wasn't Born Here* we ended the play by setting the table and inviting the audience to eat with us. In *Crossing Borders* they were invited to sing, and in *Canadian Tango* they were taught to dance the tango in the final scene.

During the research for this production, it became clear that violence against women was a serious issue in the Latin American community. We turned then

to Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed to raise awareness and educate the public about the prevention of family violence. PUENTE began to use Theatre of the Oppressed techniques such as Forum and Image Theatre to discuss a number of issues that were present in the lives of immigrants: family conflicts, racism, work related problems, human rights abuses, sexual harassment and other oppressions. We were telling stories about the immigrant experience, but members of our audience were coming on stage to change those stories and to express their views on how problems could be solved. They had become, to use Boal's expression, "spect-actors" instead of spectators. As sufferers of many of the oppressions we discussed, they were the experts in saying how those oppressions could end! I was astonished to observe the great creative and healing energy that was released when the audience came to share the stage with the actors. It made me reflect on the nature of the relationship between actors and audience. As actors, we tell stories; our audience listens to us. These two elements, telling and listening, are at the core of human communication and are equally important. If a person remains in the role of either listener or teller, communication becomes incomplete, unsatisfactory. It seemed to me that everyone should get a chance to play both roles. I started looking for more ways to share the stage with the audience and to do it in an artistic and theatrical way.

I learned, then, of another form of popular theatre begun in England called the "Community Play". It was a collaboration between theatre professionals and a group of people from a neighborhood or village who wanted to tell their community's story on stage, to examine and celebrate that story, and to use this experience as a guide the future. It was a wonderful way to facilitate community development. Immigrant women constituted a community, but a community with a shared experience rather than a common identity rooted in a geographical place. We had all left our countries of origin in order to establish ourselves in a new land, and we shared many powerful feelings.

The plays *Sisters/Strangers* and *Storytelling our Lives*, produced by PUENTE in 1996 and in 2003, were based on the Community Play model. Five professional actresses guided and orchestrated a chorus of thirty or forty immigrant women. The shows were conceived as touring productions to reach women throughout the province, and this meant that the chorus changed in each city that we visited. Both plays were created in Victoria, where for almost a year we met periodically to write and structure the play in consultation with the community of immigrant women. They wanted to express how they had struggled and succeeded in overcoming difficulties, and they wanted the play to acknowledge both that they had lived through an ordeal and that they deserved to celebrate their lives. As one woman put it; "We don't want to feel down, stuck in all the problems." The final scene of the play was very poignant. The performers lined up according to how long they had been in Canada, from the most recently arrived to the woman who had been in the country the longest. A First Nations elder welcomed the women with generous and moving-words. This scene has remained PUENTE Theatre's signature.

We continue to look for ways of redefining our relationship with the audience. For example, we have created a special format for storytelling events where everybody gets a chance to tell a story of personal significance. The participants are always surprised by the fact that they do have a story to tell and that their experiences are both valued and listened to. In these events, I have been privileged to hear unforgettable stories that have enriched my

understanding of the human condition. The fact that everybody plays the roles of both teller and listener fosters genuine interactive human communication. If we really want to be in touch with one another, we need to create opportunities for this kind of communication to happen more and more.

In the past, only the stories of the powerful were considered worthy of being told. The main characters in literature were kings, queens, and aristocrats. Nowadays we regularly hear in detail about what happens in the lives of the rich and famous. But each person's story is important. There are lessons to be learned from the stories of minorities, marginal people, of the "other". There is a truth in the stories of the disenfranchised and oppressed that is not generally found in the stories of the powerful. This is why we have to listen to the voices that have been silenced, either because they don't speak the language, because they are not eloquent, or simply because it is not convenient to hear them.

In this era of globalization and big business, the arts have become a commodity, not a means of expression. Culture has become primarily a product to sell and has been turned into an industry. Assuming always the passive role of spectator creates a feeling of unworthiness. In the current climate, the only role for the audience is to sit, watch, admire and pay. In saying this, I do not want to devalue the importance of professional artists whose talent and dedication as musicians, dancers or actors illuminate our lives. But there needs to be a balance. In the past, everybody danced, sang and created beautiful offerings. But today, society has moved dangerously close to promoting passivity and inhibition among those who are not professional artists. This passivity provokes a deep unhappiness. Depression is rampant and suicide is one of the main causes of death among adolescents. One of the causes of this unnatural situation is our denial of a fundamental aspect of our being: our creative and inspired souls. Exercising our creativity through the arts is a powerful way to find balance and fulfillment.

PUENTE is now almost 16 years old. We have expressed many aspects of the immigrant experience in our plays, and we have opened up to include all immigrants, not only those from Latin America. We try all possible avenues to keep creating bridges.

Our main objective is to share the power of the stage and reclaim the tradition of popular celebrations in which everybody had a creative role to play. It is important for all to listen to one another and to have a true and constant exchange. It is not only entertainment, or therapy or education; it is a vital flow of human communication that will keep us alive and blooming.

So this was my story, and that of PUENTE Theatre. I am grateful for the opportunity to tell it and also to listen to the many rich stories that are being told at this conference where the marvelous universal mosaic of drama is being displayed. www.puentetheatre.ca