

Colombian-born actor, director and psychotherapist **HECTOR ARISTIZABAL** directs plays where audiences and actors interact with one another to understand and resolve the burning conflicts of our times.

Theatre of the Oppressed: Influencing Public Opinion Through the Performing Arts



PHOTO: DEEPENDRA BAIRACHARYA

Interview by **Janset Berzeg**

Can you tell us something about who you are, and why you do what you do?

When I think of myself, I think of an artist, a father, someone who most of all wants to help others access their own strengths and their own gifts. My professional background is in psychology and performing arts but I am also a torture survivor, and what I have survived is a major reason why I travel the world performing and speaking out.

I grew up in a low-income suburb on the outskirts of Medellin, Colombia at a time when there was horrific violence. There were few jobs and little opportunity for education and so it was a prime recruiting ground for Colombia's four armies: the government military, the right-wing death squads, the revolutionary guerrilla groups, and the cocaine mafia.

I buried most of the kids I played soccer with. I avoided all four armies, but I didn't expect to live long.

You are also the co-author of "Blessing Next to the Wound", a recently released book about your life story. In the book you mention that you were "an angry man who gave angry speeches". Did you ever get over your anger?

It is more about transforming the energy rather than getting over the anger for me. Anger is the energy that allows us to stay alive; the heat in the body sometimes helps us survive so I do not see it as an opponent. It is important to create justice.

If I end up hurting others because of my anger, say soldiers or corrupt people, I will not change

the conditions that created them. Potentially I could also become a torturer or a killer and inflict damage to another person's body or psyche, but I am just not that kind of person.

I have done that in my imagination and dreams and I realised I have been able to symbolise my experience. The anger is there now to feed my desire to transform society.

What is your view on the reconciliation processes then?

Much effort is being invested in the world for truth and restorative-justice models and none of them are perfect. I believe in telling the truth and

freely sharing stories; when victims have the opportunity to tell their stories they go behind their trauma.

Trauma is like a layer that covers the story. Stories need to come out and that's why I use theatre techniques to invite people to penetrate that armour.

In telling their stories, they can work toward healing themselves and their communities. As the Zen monk Claude Anshin Thomas says, healing doesn't mean that our pain and suffering goes away. Healing is learning to live in a different relationship with our pain and suffering so it does not control us.

What made you decide to use theatre for peace and justice as an alternative to frontline combat? What held you back from joining a revolutionary group despite the very bitter way torture has marked your life?

I didn't find many of the so-called revolutionary groups so revolutionary. In my opinion, their ideological principals don't match with their frontline activity and there is also a high level of abuse towards poor populations.

There is rape, the use of child soldiers for combat and cocaine trafficking. I saw them blowing up pipelines supposedly to attack transnational corporations and



PHOTO: DEEPENDRA BAJRACHARYA

causing terrible environmental damage in the process.

I never identified with their tactics. Instead I found them extremely unimaginative in their analysis on how societies should be changed. I found theatre and arts more interesting to use as a way for different communities to imagine alternatives to their problems, to find out what works best for them, rather than the fight between economic systems, like socialism versus capitalism.

I am more interested in experiences of self-determination and self-governance. For example in Colombia, Peace Communities

(las comunidades de paz) told the government that they don't want any armed groups anymore. They simply asked to be left in peace and alone. The only reason they haven't yet disappeared is because of the international groups that offer support to the leaders of these people. They receive constant threats.

From all the revolutionary groups that I came across I feel most sympathetic to the structure of the Zapatista movement (EZLN) in Mexico where people take all decisions themselves. It is a model that is different from every other guerrilla model in South America.

I realized more and more that the way we best conceive any movement is by becoming who we are. The more I participate in the transformation of life, the more I feel interested in inviting people to take charge of the decisions that are affecting their lives.

Can you tell us how you met Augusto Boal and how you became involved with the Theatre of the Oppressed and came to create Nightwind? In what way do you portray torture in your play and what are you trying to achieve by it?

A lot of my work is combined

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in three main streams, which are: my interest in healing and psychology; my art form (theatre); and my interest in changing society (activism). I met Boal in Nebraska, US, in 1998 at a conference and I utterly identified with the way he used theatre to create dialogue.

I saw how people found a sense of power with the Theatre of the Oppressed. Since then, I have used Boal's methodology as a therapist, activist and teacher, combined with psychodrama, council circles (drawn from the Native American tradition to sustain difficult conversations) etc.

But the spinal cord of the work I am developing is inspired by Boal. In synthesis I like to use theatre as a laboratory to explore alternatives to conflict and in its oldest sense theatre as a healing ritual. It is a means of reconnecting with the roots of our main identity as an individual and as a community and in theatre we bring out all the threads that make us who we are.

I like the power of theatre in creating short plays to show representations of reality – the difficult realities people say they are living – and invite the audience to democratise the stage by replacing the main characters. They spontaneously change the script to seek a different outcome. I do not tell them what to do. It becomes an aesthetic dialogue that connects us to our bodies and our minds and eventually becomes a rehearsal for life.

In theatre you can pretend to hurt someone but they don't really die or get hurt, so it is like a lab. We look at situations and

see the potential consequences. Everybody has something to say not just the so-called experts.

No one knows better than the person who goes through the situation. Its dynamic, playful, carries humour; it humanises us. It is unpredictable and connects to the mystery of life and also to what we are witnessing in life.

The recent Occupy Movement is a great example of what I'm trying to say. This is a movement that tries to occupy the places that have a meaning to us. Behind most institutions and so-called ideas of development there is an extreme nihilism. We see now the

spring awakening, and people are trying to occupy their own lives again. I disagree with those that say the Occupy Movement needs to have a clear message. I believe this movement will evolve like the soul, which is the place where humanity transforms itself.

The soul, the spirit and the body – think of it like in Christianity, but the soul has long been cut off, so humanity was left with the body that carries all the burden of life. Occupy is the Movement of the soul, of the trauma and I am very sympathetic to it.

No one knows better than us on how our lives should be managed. That's why now Nightwind is performed mostly internationally.

I am very privileged to be working for change in different places. I take the ideas around to Northern Ireland, the Basque Country, Palestine, Georgia to learn from all these places and it enriches the work so we can all learn from each other, rather than killing each other.

How do you see the current political situation in Colombia? I am also curious to know more about your involvement with (SOA) School of Americas Watch and your thoughts about the graduates who were involved in war crimes and genocide who are still holding important political positions in Latin America.

School of Americas Watch is an independent organisation that seeks to close the US Army School of the Americas, through vigils, demonstrations, nonviolent protests, as well as media and legislative work. Some of us use street theatre and giant puppets to tell the story of why we want the School to be closed and create the images of the world that we want. I'm now working on a design for this year I want to involve as many people as possible in the creation of puppets and in taking action. It is not about protesting against the things we do not want, but about creating the images of what we do want.

SOA has so far trained more than 60,000 South and Central American assassins to fight against their own people. The current president of Guatemala is connected with mass killings. Another graduate of the SOA holds office in Honduras.

Plan Colombia, which was used to militarise my native country, was designed by an SOA graduate. For the US, the strategic geopolitical position of Colombia makes it the perfect base to control South America.

SOA still plays a very important role in terms of training the officials that are in charge of

counterinsurgency. They used the excuse of the war on drugs but we all know it is to control populations in South America.

I like to think there is hope because, for example, recently Brazil elected Dilma Rousseff and before that Chile had elected Michelle Bachelet – two powerful women, left-wing, torture survivors – as presidents of their countries.

Colombia is probably the most right-wing controlled government amongst its neighbouring countries. It is not an accident that

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Colombia recently passed a free-trade agreement with the US. The whole country is considered an open-pit mine.

US involvement is getting worse in Colombia, the former president, Álvaro Uribe, gave permission to the US to set up seven military bases and the US also has control of big corporations that are buying up Colombia's natural resources.

It is not surprising that Colombia has the largest internally displaced population in the whole world; mostly consisting of the indigenous, the Afro-Colombians and the poor farmers.

Paramilitary groups target displaced people. Some are displaced twice, once from their land and then from places where they seek protection. There is a great deal of investment in exploitation.

Tell us something about the Otto Rene Castillo Award for Political Theatre that you recently received. RT readers will also be interested to hear about the documentary on torture survivors in which you appear.

The prize came as a rewarding surprise, there is no money associated with it but there is recognition, which is very encouraging. I am humbled and honoured by it.

Very recently I have also been involved in a documentary project titled “Beneath the Blindfold”, directed and produced by Ines Sommer and Kathy Berger. It is a documentary that shows the lasting impact of torture on survivors, including myself, a Guatemalan doctor, a Liberian child soldier and a US Navy veteran.

Four years ago there was a research poll that said 43 percent of Americans condone torture. I just hope this film can reach people and help them understand that torture is actually not an effective way to get information, that it has been discredited by interrogators, and that it is a dreadful violation of human rights.

We hope that the Americans who see this film will condemn the practice. The film was first screened on 13 January in Chicago, US. We are hoping for a wider screening throughout the world. **R**

Launch of

“FROM THE DARKNESS TO THE LIGHT”

From the darkness to the light: Australia's Program of Support for Survivors of Torture and Trauma (PASTT) was launched at Parliament House in Canberra on 23 June 2011. The report, which was funded by the Department of Health and Ageing, was launched by the Hon Mark Butler, Federal Minister for Mental Health and Ageing.

From the darkness to the light is the second publication prepared by the Forum of Agencies Supporting Survivors of Torture and Trauma (FASSTT), and provides information about the important work of FASSTT member agencies in combating the effect of torture and trauma across

Australia, as well as a profile of each member agency and their services, demographic information about FASSTT clients across Australia, and case studies of FASSTT agency services.

STARTTS CEO Jorge Aroche attended the launch, accompanied by a number of STARTTS managers, together with leaders of 17 community organisations. The function provided a valuable opportunity for these leaders to exchange experiences and information, to see some of the workings of Australia's Parliament, and to participate in the work that FASSTT agencies undertake safeguarding health and human rights. **R**

Copies of the report can be downloaded from the FASSTT website: www.fasstt.org.au

