

Jill Greenhalgh reports on Magdalena Pacifica

I returned from Colombia in awe of the women and men who made Magdalena Pacifica a reality. It was quite a trip. Exhausting. Maddening. Frightening. But above all rewarding. And I believe a huge success for the Theatre Group La Mascara of Cali – Pilar Restrepo, Lucy Bolanos and Susanna Uribe.

magdalena pacificaLa Mascara has suffered a humiliating level of 'invisibilisation' of their work of thirty years. But they are extremely stubborn and have worked consistently developing performances and working with marginalised groups of women in their community. Their refusal to be undermined by a lack of recognition has now, finally, paid off. The Cali community and the Colombian Theatre community could not ignore the success of MAGDALENA PACIFICA.

In more than 70 events over 9 days spread throughout the city – audiences, of Cali citizens packed out the venues and demanded more. The forum each afternoon, was also clearly a watershed series of debates within the context of women and culture in Colombia. Leading feminists, artists and scholars converged from throughout the country and the level of discourse was passionate and forceful and will, I am certain, lead to the insistence of further debate surrounding women's social and cultural status.

Colombia is currently in such a mess - politically and socially. The cities are under siege. People avoid overland travel and there is an unprecedented migration of rural people into the cities. They are fleeing the endless and bloody repression from army, paramilitary, guerrillas and the drug lords. So, the edges of the cities are sprawling shantytowns with no facilities and dire poverty. It seems so tragic and crazy because Colombia is one of the most beautiful countries in the world and one of the richest in terms of its vast natural resources

All the theatre artists that I met are very active in cultural projects with all levels of society. Their energy is boundless and their solidarity with workers, rural farmers and each other is remarkable to witness. There is hardly any government support for art and culture and yet they seem to manage to pull off huge and effective gatherings and events that display such a positive resistance to all the violence that swallows everyone's lives.

The Magdalena Pacifica Festival in Cali – hosted a number of international companies and we were all treated extremely hospitably and our security was of the highest priority. Thankfully, there were no incidents, which was a huge relief to the organisers.

There were performances from some 30 Colombian Companies, all of which focused on issues relating to women. There were some women directors – but I would like to have seen more work composed and constructed by women. I hope the festival will have given more women artists the confidence to take on the director's role.

My own work went well. I worked for 5 days with 8 Colombian actresses and two Mexican actresses who had worked on a previous version of the Water[war]s in Denmark. We created version 5. It was set in a house that was being renovated. It was also a pleasure for me to be able to see Nomad Teatro of Spain with the performance I directed together with Mike Brookes last year – 'Las Sin Tierra – 7 attempted crossings of the Straits of Gibraltar.' The work of all the international artists was well received – and I think for all of us who travelled to Cali, the experience, though at times very frustrating – was intensely rewarding.

The second part of the festival took place in Bogota at the invitation of Patricia Ariza who is one of the most important and well-respected theatre activists in Colombia. She has had a long relationship with the Magdalena and was instrumental in helping La Mascara in Cali to mount their festival. Patricia Ariza organised a number of opportunities for exchange both with artists and political activists. A final meeting in her

magical home gave birth to a new network of Women in Theatre in Colombia and Latin America. Graciella Rodriguez of Armar in Argentina will co-ordinate the practicalities this network with the aim of creating a number of smaller meetings in Ecuador, Peru, Argentina and Colombia in the first instance. She will be very glad to hear from anyone who has an interest. She can be contacted at gr50@fullzero.com.ar

Patricia concluded with an open proposal to invite theatre artists to come and work for 3 – 6 months on theatre projects in Bogota. In return, she can offer accommodation and food. She believes that bringing artists in to work on cultural projects with the community, is one way to bring the reality of what is happening in Colombia to the outside world. The terror-mongering press that is keeping foreign visitors at bay could result in isolating the country and its people to a destructive extreme, allowing the current corrupt regimes to continue to maintain their stranglehold on the people and the economy. Patricia can be contacted on cesatizabal@hotmail.com.

I want to extend a personal thanks to all the women and men that I met in Colombia, and in particular Lucy, Pilar, Susanna and Patricia. I feel humbled by their solidarity with each other and by their ceaseless activity to redress the violence that attempts to paralyse their lives. Their work sustains the dignity of their beautiful country.

Jill Greenhalgh
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