

Lali Armengol Argemí

A Presence in the Streets

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LOOKING BACK

Twenty years of theatre-making have brought many wishes, words and gestures into the spotlight, full and meagre applause, legible and indecipherable signs, a great deal of body and soul. We create memory from experiences we have forgotten and re-interpreted, even though they are an integral part of our life and theatre work.

As a group of women we began to think of ourselves in theatrical terms in 1983. We prepared our street debut, beginning with an idea and lots of intentions. Our priority at that time was to produce a theatre piece which would raise awareness of the new Civil Code Reform that Venezuelan women had managed to bring about in 1982. We needed to make it known in order to make it ours, and wanted this to happen in an entertaining way. The discussion forums and lectures had not been successful, especially in terms of certain social groups of women.

Our first performance piece *Qué broma con la Reforma* (Reform, what a joke!), which opened on the 8th of March, compared the new reform with articles from the old code pointing out the patriarchal nature of legislation. We began with a parody of the theory of creation and the part assigned to women within it, in order to understand better the "coherence" of the approach given by law history.

But apart from what we were saying theatrically - including the pamphlet-like content - the fact that a group of women were on the streets, in the squares and market-places, was the greatest social transgression. Our presence and independence bothered many people. Some men expressed their disapproval through rejection and insults: the same old story, we weren't hearing anything new! They expressed their need and their wish to keep us quietly at home. Once again they were warning us that the streets did not belong to us, that we were only there because we were crazy, because we didn't have husbands or suchlike. They used the usual arguments that flourish when women are in public places causing annoyance and their presence is inter-

preted as a displacement of the masculine. We might imagine that things would be different today...

On the other hand, many of our female audience were disconcerted by the fact that we were talking about the same things that had been worrying them for far too long, and that had been putting excessive demands and obligations upon their lives. We were a mirror. At the end of the street performances, women approached us with precise questions about the reformed civil code in connection with their own doubts and problems. Sometimes women lawyers would accompany the performances in order to clarify our spectators' questions and make suggestions for legal procedures. None of the women's concerns were foreign to us, because some of us - myself included - had been through divorce cases under the old code. We were well acquainted with the snares within the law and with what in our show we called "the macho law".

"The creative integrity of women in the streets" and "Feminism as theatre action" were two newspaper headlines. The first is from *El Siglo Veintuno de Guatemala* and the second from a local newspaper of the 1980s. "The first time I saw Teatro 8 de Marzo was in the Boulevard Pérez Almarza in Maracay. I was aware of them from a distance, like a festoon of women who had a lot to say publicly. They had an urgent message. Women had found another way of making themselves heard via the aesthetic world of the stage." (Published by Ana de Hoy in *El Siglo*, Maracay)

We continued to add extra scenes to *Qué broma con la Reforma* with themes we felt were crucial, like the question of penalised abortion, still unresolved in our country. The section dealing with this issue seemed very irreverent at the time. Actually, in public it still is! Sometimes the police threatened us - perhaps because of the abor-

tion sketch, perhaps not - because we didn't always get the proper permissions for street performances. We often forgot to deal with this requirement. Colleagues and friends would act as look-outs, placed strategically on street corners to warn us, or they would take care of our permits for us, collecting them at the last minute.

We also incorporated the tragedy of the 90,000 political disappeared people in Latin America in the performance, revealing statistics from each country except our own. At that time we didn't have - or were not aware of - human rights violations in Venezuela and there were no organisations dedicated to these outrages, so crucial for justice and democracy. There was a Chilean woman in the group, Lelia Perez, who helped us grow politically with her experiences as an exile. We were discovering many practices that had been made to look normal and we took it upon ourselves to show the abnormality of what we could.

With the first show we toured most of the cities in Venezuela. We imagined ourselves moving by horse and cart, stopping in each village, but we actually travelled in an uncomfortable minibus, all we could afford to hire. It is hard to understand now how we managed this with so few resources, even though we had the help of friends who waited for us everywhere. Those were different times and we were different too, with our endless energy and hunger for encounters, our need to speak and communicate.

We believed that women's lot would change faster through our work. Of course we had an effect, but we decidedly overestimated the consequences of our work. We thought that we were changing the world with theatre, but the world is still taking its time to change. *We* changed, and the lives of some other women changed, as they discovered ways to look at themselves and

the world around them.

"Gaining awareness, and even more than awareness, coming into the light, is a glorious success, the epiphany that all reality accedes to in making itself finally visible." For me, these words, from the philosopher Maria Zambrano, seem today to connect to what we felt then and still sometimes feel even today.

Venezuelan feminist groups and friends appreciated our work and supported our presence in the streets. At the time, we didn't realise that we were militant feminists both within and beyond theatre. Later on, thanks to Katina Fantin, we understood and endorsed this fact. We began to deepen our search, to give it shape through study and experimentation. Our arguments began to ripen and get stronger, as we achieved more authority in speaking up backed by historical experience and other women's thinking.

THE HOUSE

Coming back from our longest tour, traveling through four different states, after sharing with the women who had opened the first Women's Centre in the country, in Maracaibo, we concluded that we too should open a "house". We had an attack of female magnitude! In this way the uncertainty we were left with at the end of performances would be resolved and we could respond to the anxieties expressed by the women who approached us.

We did it; we didn't have a plan, just the urge and the commitment. We rented a house and opened it with a minimum of services and volunteers. It was quite an event in our town and it was well covered by the press. People thought that our madness knew no bounds - fortunately this was the case! Later we analysed our decisions with more clarity. Obviously our euphoria was the driving force then; we discovered the value of the empowerment of conviction amid

enthusiasm and hard work. The viability and sustainability of our project had not been addressed. It was a decision buoyed up by our utopian vision, commitment, delirium and the relationship between us.

The Centre still exists and it has had its eighteenth anniversary. Along the way, we had to overcome many problems and the theatre group and its productions suffered sometimes because of this. After opening the Centre, we needed to maintain it, we also rehearsed there, and this required a lot of time and work. There weren't many of us then. As always, we were short of resources, apart from what was available from self-management. The Centre started specialising in programmes dedicated to the attention to and prevention of violence against women, especially physical and sexual violence, and became one of the most established organisations of its kind in our country.

From the beginning we marked the theoretical boundaries of the fusion that had occurred at the start between the two organisations, the theatre and the house. We conceived them as two projects that would nourish and complement each other, but independently. There would be members who belonged to both organisations, in time joined by other women who shared the same ideals as us.

A PARENTHESIS THAT IS NOT

Creating the first couple of shows, we presumed that all work within the group was collective, from directing to writing, to costume design, etc. We thought our work ought to be collective and called it so, even if it did not really work out in practice. Our definitions were a bit vague; we were growing, wanting to be, learning and sharing what each one of us knew or worked out intuitively. As is often the case in these situations, practice and working reality often

produce disillusionment around roles and responsibilities.

In analysing whether or not we were making collective theatre, we disagreed on the concept of the collective method that each of us had. One of us especially had strong objections on this particular subject. We even invited friends to offer their opinions. The subject came up from time to time as an unresolved issue, although in reality the majority of us didn't undertake the work as a group who created collectively.

In the early years women joined and left the group quite frequently.¹ I think that this, together with the marked differences in theatre experience and the different levels of interest in taking part theatrically, was what made - or would have made - it difficult to operate in a truly collective way. If collective discussion was an act of non-recognition for those women who fulfilled the roles of director, dramaturg, costume designer, stage manager, set designer etc., it also produced interesting and complex analyses. We were unsure whether or not personalising the work and giving space to individual authorship might be interpreted as egotistic, something considered bad amongst us at the time. We wanted to have one common voice now that we had stopped being like the dumb Latin goddess Tacita.

In my opinion, acknowledging that we had different jobs in the company was for some amongst us a betrayal of the initial spirit of our project. Even though it had

never been said or written down anywhere, these were supposed to be the implicit principles among women in a group like ours, where nobody would play the lead. But, in fact, it was really just a case of recognising the contribution of each woman and not ignoring it. Possibly at first we fell into the equality trap. For us, division of labour had a bad historical resonance, but also the collective ideal of equality - without really existing in practice - resembled at times the negation and anonymity that history had imposed upon women in the past. Moreover the question of authorship undoubtedly related to ego.

We never had the idea of living in a commune. Our lives, our motherhood and other jobs probably stopped us from even thinking that we could "leave it all". If we had lived together, we could have explored a way of working collectively in the deepest sense of the word. But everyday life was not so easy. We all had many responsibilities apart from theatre.

I believe that the central challenge was how to give each member of the group the chance to use her talents and theatrical intelligence so that the group, and also, of course, we as individuals, could grow, claiming the value of similarity in order to recognise the other and ourselves.

1. In the first productions the group consisted of: actresses Eulalia Gilabert, Lali Armengol Argemí, Marieta Arias, Vicky López, Lelia Pérez, Verónica Otero, Aída Arroyo, Doris Hoyos, Laura Izquierdo, Katina Fantini, Teresa Benítez, Nora Salazar, Yeya UCV Dacxy Gualdrón, María Hernández, Luisa Varela, Nancy Lira, Belkys Ochoa, Martha Bermúdez, Laura Sequera, Carmen Uzcátegui; musicians Isabel Mester, Laura; scenery designers Belén Muñoz and Antonio Cabezas; costume designers Nora Salazar and Vicky López; sound technician Nelson Cuervo; lighting designer Lenin Delgado; photographers Franca Donda, Gladys Parentelli; playwright and director Lali Armengol Argemí.

Since 1999 the artistic and technical group has been composed of actresses Marieta Arias, Doris Hoyos, Daifra Blanco, Violeta Fonseca, Luisa Fernanda Sifontes, Laura Vargas; stage designers Victor Martínez, Alejandro Paéz; lighting designer Lenin Delgado; sound technician Vilmará Lara; costume designers Nora Salazar, Franklin Salgado; producer Verónica Otero; assistant producer Nellet Tovar, photographer Miriam Rodríguez; director and playwright Lali Armengol Argemí.

For this to happen it was necessary to develop unconventional kinds of relationships. We followed intuition, since we could not rely on technique. Giving ourselves time for creation, and identifying ourselves in the work, without wanting to appear similar or repeat or imitate, helped us to develop ways of doing that conserved the relationship of woman to woman. We didn't know how these relationships should be, but we were building them, and what was happening seemed to be new and good. These results helped us to value the contributions that each of us brought to creating a new performance.

The actresses were playwrights on stage, although we didn't call them that. A work system was established in which we were careful to preserve the creative relationships, accepting and looking at each other as much as possible. It was an unending process, which was extremely demanding. We did, however, lack deeper reflection, not giving enough time to analysing the creative approach. We have also failed to document our experience at all in its different versions.

AFTER THE PARENTHESIS THAT WAS NOT

It was around 1987 that we managed to get our first financial subsidy from the government. We were used to pitching in whatever was missing. None of us received payment; rather we would finance work ourselves in order to produce and travel.

The second piece we made was *A todas sirve el zapato* (They all need the shoe), a story that was a satire on the notion of love in fairy-tales. Afterwards came *Mi tía Merena a un sólo color* (My aunt Merena in one colour), the story of an imaginative aunt who was, however, anchored to tradition in





Images from Teatro 8 de Marzo performances:

1. *Vidas Repetidas*; 2. *Qué broma con la Reforma*; 3. *Nosotras por la paz*;
4. *Qué broma con la Reforma*; 5. *Vidas repetidas* Photos: Franca Donda
6. *Mi tía Merena a un sólo color* Photo: Gladys Parentelli
7. *Betty Blue con remolacha* Photo: Miriam Rodríguez



We recall the first years as total passion; a time when we were able to accept all kinds of invitations to the most unusual places and working conditions. We rehearsed at quite difficult hours - from nine to eleven at night. We took workshops with knowledgeable and experienced artists; for example friends like Herculía López who would come to Maracay on Saturdays to help us. We also participated in many other theatre workshops.

Everything which happened in our country became a pretext for taking a theatrical position, whenever we could, if we thought it important. We were totally dedicated feminist theatre militants, with our gratification coming from our daily audiences.

Apart from our repertory, we were unfailingly present in the streets on the 8th of March, International Woman's Day, and on the 25th of November, the day of No Violence against Women, with shows and "exercises" - our name for the shorter performances.

The early years were central to the development of our work. We were exploiting an independent and creative life at the same time as the sheer novelty of our existence. Two university students wrote their theses about our first production, and this was important for our way of making theatre. We started to exist, and this became generative in itself. Looking back after twenty years means trying to understand that theatre was our life, in the sense of a collection of many important moments of being. Now, we even ask ourselves, what were we doing in theatre, how did we heed the commitment to our jobs, our studies, our relationships with our families - our daughters and sons. Because, if I remember rightly, only one of us was married, while the others were single or divorced, with relatively stable partners, but not living together on a daily basis.

We made a piece that we called *Octavita democrática, homenaje a Segal* (Democratic Octavita, homage to Segal) during a very delicate political situation, with suspended civil rights. Later came *De esta paz, pez* (Of this peace, fish). We developed a non-verbal language, to speak against war and power. Pronouncing ourselves against power is a constant in our theatre, and also fits within our feminist vision.

We had a great deal of fun and travelled a lot with *Vidas repetidas*, a street *telenovela* with all its dramas and reiterative situations. This took us to Central America and to Cataluña in Spain, in very penurious economic conditions. This travelling period forced us to rethink ourselves in many ways, especially the relationships between ourselves. We spent many days together and there were lots of difficulties and logistical problems to solve. It seems that many groups go through this trial of living together in hazardous situations. Conclusion: we were no different!

ANOTHER CHAPTER

In 1992, we left the streets with *Platos*, a piece that recaptured the good feel of an "exercise" we had presented in the squares. The creative process demanded that we enter more private and intimate spaces. We were also beginning to feel the exhaustion that comes from working in the streets with no production team, no resources or security, without transport and technical equipment. Being in the squares or in the streets was no longer the same as it had been in the beginning. Difficulties and fatigue became visible: without doubt it was a sign. *Platos* marked a critical moment and the beginning of a new phase. We thought we would always return to the streets, but that has not happened yet.

We remained inside and started going deeper into the theme which had driven us

from the first day: ourselves, all of us, looking and listening to ourselves in the moment and in time. With the productions *Platos*, *Betty Blue con remolacha*, *Miss Gloria*, *Ellas hablan solas*, and *Click* we approached the theme of patriarchal power differently. Our point of view came from the intimate and daily sphere, from our own experiences, or rather, from the mark of women's historical experience that obviously finds an echo and an explanation in feminist history and theory.

Our economic situation improved in 2001 with a subsidy from the Consejo Nacional de la Cultura, but still none of us could dedicate ourselves totally to the theatre group. Each of us had another job. Would our productions have been more prolific and artistically better in other conditions? Who knows? Nevertheless we were extremely demanding of ourselves and we worked critically within our artistic limits, devoting ourselves totally in terms of time, apprenticeship and commitment. But without doubt to dedicate oneself only to theatre would have provided another dimension to our work. Possibly today the value of our work is being reconsidered and in fact economic support, and therefore the conditions of work, have improved.

THEY SPEAK ALONE

With the second to last production, *Ellas hablan solas* (They speak alone), we wanted to confront the specific theme of violence theatrically. In an open frame of uncertainty - the usual condition for every new creative process - a sharp language emerged, touching upon pain with a certain dose of sarcasm. The edge was held between laughter and tears, between hard words and the absent body, movement and stillness, which we later understood had their connections in the implicit contradiction of making violence and its victims appear normal and invisible.

Even though these clues appeared during the process of research and rehearsal, the fact of using them in the final result was disconcerting because the language of the piece emerged in a more fluid form than at other times. We had postponed confronting the theme of violence because of the questions we had about how it would work theatrically, much more specifically than with other themes. We were afraid that theatricality could not work with the theme of violence, and that we would return to a merely ideological theatre, leaving behind the possibility for abstraction and poetry because of the eagerness to denounce violence.

It was not so. Probably because we had thought about the theme a lot, we were close to the codes that would decipher it. We only had to recall a familiar story and give expressive power to the actions which flowed in our memory. Perhaps this is the reason why, in comparison to other performances, the gestation of *Ellas hablan solas* was quite short.

We had the illusion of forming part of a movement of women throughout the whole world that researches and produces artistically in order to speak up and to deconstruct inequality. Our passion was a commitment and a reason for life. This is nothing new amongst so many women who do the same: we concur in gender, in historical experience, in self-recognition and in recognition of the women who came before us. Together we are in favour of a theatre that can emerge without intermediaries from a vision of our own; a theatre that is not afraid of what it testifies to and does not need permission or applause to be able to speak.

The theme of women's lives is fashionable in our country's plays today. Even if in general, from my point of view, the body and sexuality are spoken of without metaphors, it seems that a discourse that describes and

reveals us women has received recognition. It seems that how women talk about themselves should be somehow truer than when described by men, but in fact at base and on the surface the two visions are too similar. The importance of the female in theatre sometimes looks too much like a striptease and we will have to re-vision much if this shows itself to be a step backwards, as I think it is.

Except for the early years, when we would install ourselves anywhere at our own expense and without many requirements, our productions have always suffered limitations in their touring. We are not able to bring together our circuit and audience again, even though the spectators are mostly women in Venezuela. The centralist character of our country and the political crisis that we suffer from at the moment that also affects cultural life, do not help us. We have to admit that for the above mentioned reasons and because of problems of publicity, we pass by *incognito* outside our town, as if we did not exist, as if we were not saying or doing anything.

We have accepted that this is a reality to be overcome, especially in terms of the fact that Venezuelan women do not feel summoned or that they do not even know who we are. This is not easy to admit, even when counting the many friends who come to see us, who accompany us and who refer to us. I am not thinking of the public at large, but we are concerned by the lack of relationship between the Venezuelan women's movement, feminists or not, and a group of theatre makers that has not stopped talking of *us* women since 1983. With certainties and uncertainties, we have searched for a rigorous theatre language that we want to share. Maybe this point deserves separate investigation and we should look at new ways of promoting ourselves. We have

tried: I have to say this so as not to give the impression that we have been simply waiting inside the theatre. The lack of communication and the absence of networks, or not knowing about them, keeps us in ignorance of the theatre work of others, and this disconnection affects us.

I do not know why I end with this rather painful confession that is perhaps unnecessary today. The lack of connection hurts me deeply and the feeling of disappointment because of our limited capacity to reach out and be seen could paralyse us or, to be less dramatic, discourage us. Perhaps we should just think that the atmosphere is not right or simply not changing quickly enough in relation to our wishes and aims.

Translated from Spanish by Siân Thomas
and Julia Varley

LALI ARMENGOL ARGEMÍ (Venezuela) was born in Spain, in 1945. She founded the Taller Permanente de Expresión Teatral for children in 1982 and from 1984 she directed the Teatro 8 de Marzo, a women's group which presented its performances on the streets until 1992. In more than twenty plays, her work as a playwright and director focuses on woman's experience as imagined and described by the "others". Since 1990 she has been a drama teacher at the Maracay University, Venezuela, where she also directs the university theatre.