

Dancing from the heart of Heaven and Earth

Julia Escobar, co-founder of Corporación Cultural Barrio Comparsa, introduces us to the long and powerful connections with the dances of her ancestors and the creative needs of the present

Our Grandmothers and Grandfathers danced the Chitic dance, the Weasel dance, the Stilts dance To overcome selfishness and discrimination To summon the heart of Water on times of drought so Corn, nourishment for all generations, would grow

(Combination of sacred Mayan book, Popol Vhu, and Caja Lúdica's words.)

We dance to the beat of the heart of the earth, to interweave the threads of life.

I share this narration from the core of the heart of America, Guatemala. Mayan land with an ancient and ancestral culture. A plural, multiethnic, multilingual and multicultural country, home of the Mayan, Xinca, Garífuna and Mestizo people together with 23 different linguistic communities. In this culturally and artistically rich country, we find a Pre-hispanic Dancing Drama, dating from the 15th century: Rabinal Achí or XajoojTun. Because of its theatrical, musical and dancing dimensions, UNESCO declared it a masterpiece of the Oral Immaterial World Heritage in 2005. The Rabinal Achí Dancing Drama has been preserved and transmitted from generation to generation, so people don't forget their roots and memories.

It's here where I started my road back

to my roots, spirituality, ancestry, to the connection with Mother Earth and the four cardinal points. Walking by the grandparents, by the Mayan priests, by the 'tatas' and 'nanas', I found out my 'nahual', my symbol: air, wind, communication, dance, movement.

Although I've now been living in Guatemala for 14 years, I was born in Medellín (Colombia). I left my country in 2000, full of love and experiences, with my stilts, my costume, together with tons of lessons, artistic and ludic methodologies learned from several sister organisations from that beautiful country. In particular, from Barrio Comparsa Cultural (Parade District) Corporation, which I co-founded. This corporation emerged by the late 80s, when narco-terrorism had flooded streets and public spaces with feelings of dread, terror and violence. Youth was stigmatised and criminalised with no opportunities for developing its creative and transforming potential. To counter-balance this madness, several social, artistic and cultural organisations, began a peaceful resistance. We brought dance, music, parades, popular celebrations, a glimmer of hope in the middle of the darkest times, back to the streets.

We are a wandering dance, singing out life

While dancing with a street troupe,



time vanishes, space shrinks, borders overthrow. Sharing the throbbing rhythm of those bodies, hearts vibrate in unison, and new common but diverse languages are designed. This peculiar sharing allows the emergence of new fraternity and solidarity experiences, longing for freedom, communion and deep joy. For this reason, street dancing troupes became a basic element of the Action – Participation – Transformation Ludic Methodology (MLAPT) that Barrio Comparsa Corporation carries out. Some of the actions to maximise the creative capacities of human beings, are focused on the participatory experiential approach that allows people to transcend the existing rules and to propose new ways of acting



Playful Box from Guatemala

and thinking in spaces of creativity, collective resignification and human conviviality.

The methodology is an artistic training proposal based on the human being sensitisation, where dance and movement are key elements for self-knowledge, for exchanging with others and nature within a frame of respect, cooperation and solidarity. When human beings are given the chance to glance within ourselves, to acknowledge and bring movement to our bodies, respect and confidence become the basis of future interactions. If artistic expressions are then at hand, human beings thrive with warmth and creativity, generating dynamic and spontaneous creative spaces.

Blue October Festival: we dance to shatter fear and silence

After 36 years of genocide in Guatemala, people feel violated, disorganised, sad, locked. Fear freezes, minimises and reduces the body, which is the first territory affected by war traumas. In rural areas, the corporal, spiritual and mental damage is more evident. Therefore, it's necessary to intensify the sensitisation processes and the psychosocial aid. In this respect, the playful methodology, dance and the artistic expressions, become a bridge for the personal and community healing and transformation.

In 2000, while celebrating the 1944 revolution in Guatemala, Urban Art carried out the Blue October Festival.

More than 200 artistic interventions took place in all sorts of public spaces: markets, parks, public buildings, churchyards, streets. A new generation of young artists became visible, exercising their artistic freedom of expression. Simultaneously, Barrio Comparsa arrives in Guatemala, bringing its participatory Ludic Methodology in the service of young people from different communities, with an unusual articulation of resources and experiences, Street Workshops on Games, led to a huge parade of over 200 people. Dance, rhythms and choreographies overthrew walls of silence, fear and distrust. People started vibrating with the dance. The inner selves, crouched inside, turned

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Julia Escobar

into boisterous, volcanic kids, willing to freely express the diversity of dances, their personal inner rhythms, the most sacred aspect of themselves. The established rules were transgressed, the playful spirits that remained numb within the souls awoke from a long night of war and silence. This huge parade, or 'convite' (invitation), as it is called in Guatemala, was the artistic activity that gave place to the Festival. This activity contributed to the recovering of public space. And above all, they recovered a traditional aesthetic expression, with roots in the ancient and ancestral Mayan culture.

After this magic event, a collective of young creatives gave birth to Caja Lúdica, a meeting place for a new generation of artists and cultural managers who exchange methods and experiences about art and culture, opening a window towards the diversity of artistic expressions from Guatemala and other neighbouring countries.

We dance to build confidence among ourselves

Knowing and practicing dances, brings us closer to our inner self, fosters self-knowledge, transforms distrust, defeats fears, shyness and isolation. Caja Lúdica Collective implements training processes based on the previously mentioned MLAPT methodology. It's an integral educational programme that makes community art accessible to schools, families and communities, spreading the presence of peace and harmony. Caja Lúdica gathers an intergenerational, multicultural and multidisciplinary team, that uses and multiplies the methodologies with young people from different



neighbourhoods and communities, thus contributing to the reconstruction of the social tissue. This reconstruction is shared with the Guatemalan Community Art Network and the articulation of cultural movements from the region.

Street Workshops on Games and the Parade became the methodological tool that makes it possible to cultivate links of trust at a community level, since they are open, free and voluntary. Streets, parks and open public spaces are filled with dances, music and community art, with the presence of kids, young people, teachers, parents who embrace the artists in the particular magic dance of the parade, the carnival ritual and joyous celebration. In the meantime, the following workshops take place: body language, dance and movement, percussion, costume design, stilts,

artistic make-up, creative writing, choreography and animation.

Participants are free to create their own characters representing symbols and stories from their ancestral memory, combined with contemporary aesthetics. Each activity starts with an energetic circle, meant to help harmony and creativity flow among the participants. We hold each other's hands, we look into each other's eyes and we dance in circles, tight together with smiles. When the drums are heard, each participant looks for their personal rhythm, strengthening the connection with Mother Earth. We dance, and the poetry of the dancing characters that reach the people, flow. This triggers happiness and peacefulness.

The parade touches the inner fibres, numbed by precariousness, abandonment, selfishness. Waists



Far left, left and above: Playful Box from Guatemala

dance with enthusiasm and energy. Carnival movements and shaking bodies, spread around, celebrating the collective dance to the rhythm of drums and wind instruments that make us dance with our hearts in our hands. It's a ritual dance-memory, healing and connecting with people and Mother Nature. Dance activates and connects the organs, muscles, neurons, arteries and the respiratory tract, repairing damages and traumas, re-establishing the articulations so bodies can swell with confidence, become able to express all their artistic and creative abilities, speak their words, sing their songs and dance with their communities.

Dance propitiates connections between consciousness and sensitivity, conjugating the different dimensions of the self, expressed throughout dancing bodies, telling stories and making dreams come true. Dance is live community culture. It's a creation and freedom of expression deed, which calls us together to keep on learning and dancing to the rhythms of wellbeing.

We express life dancing with the heart of the earth

The ancient grandmothers and the ancient grandfathers gave birth to the dances we still dance, connected to the heart of heaven and earth, stretching our bodies towards the four cardinal points, embracing clouds, mountains, volcanos, lakes and seas.

In the beginning, we danced like the birds, monkeys, deers, jaguars, we represented butterflies and dragonflies. They were a collective creation, and became the most precious dances. So we dance, sing, write, paint, we create collectively, as a community. All dances and all other artistic expressions are rituals of creativity and harmony. Human beings need to express their feelings and aspirations. That is why the dances are inherent to us, since the dances allow us to communicate, express, show ideas and movements related to beauty and love for life.

In Guatemala, cultural diversity, languages, costumes, principles and the Mayan cosmology values, are preserved and transferred from

generation to generation, maintaining their rich cuisine, natural medicine and their community organisation or social network. Mainly preserving the ancestral dances such as Rabinal Achí Dance, Deer Dance, Weasel Dance, Giants Dance, Stilts or Chitic Dance, and many others that remain as part of nature during daily life. These are expressed in connection with the galactic poem of wellbeing, harmony and complement the elements of nature and above all, with our sisters and brothers, all the human beings who inhabit this planet earth.

Most of mankind dances, connected to life, setting up astonishing and moving aesthetics. We move forward through time 'feeling-thinking', dancing and expressing from our deepest sensitivity, consciousness and inner fibres, moving our body (our first territory), connected among ourselves, hoping a more equitable and beautiful world is possible.

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