

20 Focus on Latin America



Patricia Kistenmacher

Dancing into another world

Here begins our visit to the world of dance for social transformation in Latin America. **Patricia Kistenmacher**, trained facilitator and workshop designer, seeks to help others achieve their goals in participatory arts

In Latin America (LA), although life is unpredictable, it is always lived with overwhelming passion. But, where is LA? What sort of place is it? Let me try to give you a hint...

Beyond some Caribbean islands, beyond the Guyanas, territories still belonging to some European countries, there's a huge and diverse continent that starts in Mexico and expands to the South Pole. It provides a home to about 600 million people who mostly share one religion and two official languages, thus having a certain sense of coherence and unity. Nevertheless, it is a continent of superabundance in diversity, landscapes, ethnicities, hues, sounds, tastes, textures, colours, movements, tales, visions, dreams. A post-modern continent where contradiction and uncertainty go hand in hand. A continent with the deepest inequity between the richest and the poorest. A continent with the vast majority of its population under the age of 30, and a birth-rate diminishing abruptly.

Throughout the continent, there are 671 ethnic groups. About 222 are spread throughout Brazil, its biggest country. There, they melt with the descendants of the black slaves brought by the Portuguese from Africa, from the 17th to the 18th Centuries. Most other countries were 'conquered' by Spain as of 1492, and later on they also received black slaves. So, the current LA population is mostly mixed race between the original inhabitants: Spanish, Portuguese and peoples of Africa. As years went by and as a result of different wars fought in Europe, LA also received immigrants from countries like Poland, Russia, Germany, Italy, to mention just a few. Not to forget the strong Chinese immigration happening today.

This very limited contextualisation may help you understand the richness and variety of community cultural expressions. This is what our dear friend and colleague Ken Bartlett, of the Foundation for Community Dance, invited

me to do – to open a small window for you to peep into LA community artistic experiences.

This being a task beyond one person's capacity, I looked for help in an LA Network formed by more than 100 organisations from 12 countries. During the first years of this century, this LA Network for Art and Social Transformation emerged in the cultural continental scene and keeps on growing. It includes the different artistic languages and modes of expression, basing its action on some simple principles – artistic quality, social integration and citizenship and human rights promotion.

The articles you are going to read belong to different members of this LA Network, and you are going to recognise those roots I mentioned above while reading them.

Julia Escobar, describing the work with original inhabitants from Guatemala. Or Inés Sanguinetti, describing the work done at shanty towns in Buenos Aires, which are like a melting pot of Spaniards, Italians and original inhabitants coming from the inner provinces.

LA community experiences are crossed by a common approach, inherited from Paulo Freire. (1) Freire (1921-1997) was a Brazilian teacher and pedagogue involved in popular education and massive illiteracy in the 1960s. Imprisoned and expelled from Brazil by the military coup d'état in 1964, he returned in 1979 and joined the Workers' Party. In the meantime, he developed the Pedagogy of the Oppressed which influenced and spread through most community organisations in LA. These are a few of his own words:

"Leaders who do not act dialogically, but insist on imposing their decisions, do not organise the people – they manipulate them. They do not liberate, nor are they liberated: they oppress."

"Attempting to liberate the oppressed without their reflective participation in the act of liberation is to treat them

Edisca.
Photo: Mila
Petrillo



as objects that must be saved from a burning building.”

One of the people on whom this had a deep effect, was Augusto Boal, who thereafter founded the Theatre of the Oppressed. (2) Boal (1931-2011), a Brazilian theatre director who was also imprisoned, tortured and expelled from Brazil by the military government in 1964, developed his theatrical method based on Pedagogy of the Oppressed by Freire, of whom he was a close friend.

Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed seeks to transform audiences into active participants in theatre plays. The method seeks to transform spectators into 'spect-actors'. The particular Theater-Forum method allows spectators to replace professional actors, once the latter have presented a specific problem to a given community. It creates the conditions for the oppressed to take ownership of the means of producing art, and expand their possibilities of expression and understanding of the world around them, seeking social change.

From the 1970s, most popular art creations in LA have been influenced by the combination of this pedagogy and the Theatre of the Oppressed. Dance was not an exception. Thanks to its expansion to Europe and the visibility gained through the first International Festival for the Theatre of the Oppressed organised in Paris in 1981, a fluid dialogue was established between popular and academic art in LA. You are going to notice this in experiences like the one led by Dora Andrade in EDISCA, or the one led by Rasia Friedler in SaludArte.

In its growing path, the LA Network came across a new Brazilian hit that is again influencing LA: a public policy adopted under President Lula's mandate called Points of Culture. (3) To state it bluntly, they determined that 0.1% of the national budget should be allocated to those community organisations that enhance the development

of local popular art. The national government and the state governments negotiate with the local governments, so they can define criteria to identify those community cultural centres to be called Points of Culture. Following this driving force, the LA Network, together with several other networks, formed the Bridge Platform Live Community Culture. (4)

In May 2013 the Platform organised in La Paz, Bolivia, the first Latin American Congress on Live Community Culture (5) with the participation of more than 800 community artists from the Americas and even from Europe. One of the main activities was addressed to legislators of all three levels (national, provincial, local) who decided to create an LA Cultural Parliament, to foster the adoption of the Brazilian 0.1% budget proposal in each country. As an outcome of La Paz Congress the Third Iberoamerican Cultural Conference will take place next May 2014 in Costa Rica, on live Community Culture.

Although partial, sketchy and incomplete to represent LA gorgeousness, it is a pleasure and an honour to introduce you to these experiences full of life, transforming real people's lives in obscure corners of the continent through creating, dancing, sharing beauty and tenderness where they find hardly anything but aggressiveness or solitude. Love and hope drive them to transform their daily reality. Another world is possible.

(1) www.paulofreire.org/en

(2) ctorio.org.br/novosite/quem-somos/augusto-boal

(3) pontosdecultura.org.br

(4) www.culturavivacomunitaria.org

(5) culturavivacomunitaria.org/cv/tag/congreso-2013

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