

Enrique Vargas

## The Theatre of the Senses: Introductory Words and a Short Conversation for the Symposium

*What happens to us when we enter a Teatro de los Sentidos (Theatre of the Senses) experience? Why do we need to play? Where does our need to play come from? Why is sensory theatre relevant today? For what strange reasons do humans like to play getting lost and finding themselves in the dark? I want to share with you the reasons why Teatro de los Sentidos has been significant to me ever since I became aware of inventing myself and inventing it in my childhood games, imagining forbidden labyrinths in Colombian coffee plantations, until today, at my eighty years of age. It is clear that a lot of primal and parallel knowledge has developed over time in all cultures. Myths, celebrations, imagination, poetry, symbolic powers ... resonate differently, each according to historical circumstances. Let us ask ourselves together: what potential does sensorial theatre have today? (Enrique Vargas: Some questions before the symposium.)*

**Enrique Vargas:** I will begin with a statement that might seem unusual, but I think it is very important. I would like to stress that my worst enemy is the word. When I begin a conversation, I try not to discipline the words I use. I prefer to work on silences, listen to the silences between the words. Many times, we use words to hide something and not to make it evident. In everyday conversation, we do not pay much attention to the way we pronounce the words. We combine words with silence, give phrases a specific rhythm.

Okay, I just want to say that we begin to use the power of words if we try to revise them, giving more attention to the silences than to the word as something non-rational.

Because it all began when I was living on a farm, when I was a child in the mountains, in the Andean mountains, on a coffee plantation. Moreover, I was alone on this farm and very, very lonely. And the only way I could attract people and children to come to see me from the town was to play games, the games located on the farm. On a coffee farm, on a coffee plantation in the countryside, in this little house, one moves sideways and the walls are open and then you have another colour, the countryside and the interiors change, produce new and new games, new hidden places. And when my mother would say something to my brother and me, I would react to her words and try to recollect some conditions of how and when she spoke, pronounced, uttered the words. Then I would try to hide in the small house, to find some freedom in the

restrictions, to visit places that I was not allowed to see. To get some new experiences, to explore the world in-between words. And the trees outside gave me some freedom, and suddenly, I could go anywhere.

So playing the games became a sort of healing for the others and me. When I grew up and went to theatre school later in my life, I would ask the teachers: Listen, I want to do theatre that is not European. I like to go to my woods, trees, small objects, nature. And this is how I discovered the world of sensory sensations and theatrical gestures, theatrical games and playfulness based on our memories and contemporaneity.

First, we have a question, then we develop it and then it could be a game after the game came in. If I could make a game out of my question, then I had a good road ahead, and if it worked, but the main thing for me was to find the new rules for the game. And silence became something crucial. In silence, we develop specific conversation and the contradiction for that is priceless. In silence, and with silence, we try to develop curiosity and the narrative. We create a question in the mind of the traveller who was going to the malaria region and had to begin to work in detention.

The questions came to the very centre, becoming a central point of my research in which we make the encounters possible. The encounters between people and things, present and past, words and silence, and all the other senses.

And I realised that the theatre I make produces tension between fear and curiosity that is very important for both the performers and spectators. Extremely important. And in this way, I began to slowly develop our dynamic in which we didn't use words. We began and continued to use the smells and the skin. We like to say that our skin and obviously the silences we create are in the darkness of the labyrinth in which we could not see anything with our eyes, but we can feel, smell, touch in the world on the other side of the words. And the more words we use, the less we can tell to the others. (Silence.) Are there any questions from the public at this point?

**Tomaz Toporišič:** Once in Bogotá, I visited you and your students of anthropology at the university and you talked about the ways theatre can be linked to anthropological researches with the tribes in Colombia. And this opened completely new theatrical and performative perspectives for me that went well beyond the European and Western theatre, well beyond the concept of the theatre of words that reached the realms of Artaud's theatre as a plague, a theatre that uses its own language, not that of words and drama. Can you open up this perspective of your work a bit more to us?

**Barbara Pia Jenič:** Yes, we would be very interested in this central topic of your theatre. When I began to work with you in Teatro de los Sentidos (TDLS) in 1996, you said, "Please don't listen to my words, listen to my silences." I know you have

been thinking about these contradictions for a long time now. So, maybe you can talk about this a little more because now we are in the world, we are in a very loud world, full of images and words. So, could you tell us a bit more about this concept of silence?

**Enrique Vergas:** Yeah, I want to say that what I was trying to do, was to gain consciousness. In fact, I think we do different things and use different procedures with art in order to gain consciousness, to be conscious of something. And this is why we chose this specific way of making theatre. In order to gain consciousness of the territory, I had to gain consciousness going to places that were forbidden for me, the places that I could not see. And as I continued to explore the places while working, I found that what I was trying to do was use others to gain consciousness about me, to find out where I was coming from and where I was going to, of course.

I was practising my theatre system as something that could prevent me from becoming propagandistic and creating spectators as consumers. The symbols in the Teatro de los Sentidos became a stimulus enabling both performers and audience to go from one place to another; you go in as one form and go out as an unexpected form. Sensorial theatre enables us, therefore, to go through. And when you meet a person, you meet another person. A friend, whoever it is, your best friend, you should see him as a labyrinth, should know that while talking to you, he is enabling you to travel. We are going through both labyrinths, and we are enriched.

In Chile, when Allende was president, labyrinths were allowed and very popular, also people were sitting in circles and talking to each other. But when Pinochet came and Allende was killed, labyrinths were not allowed anymore, people in schools didn't sit in circles anymore, but one next to the other, people stopped talking.

I continued doing theatre ... In the 1960s, Stanislavsky was very important for us, then later on, Grotowski and Barba, and it became like the Vatican ... Vatican, you say? And while working and exploring, we found that the theatre world was so conservative. So stiff, we didn't find people eager to talk about their contradictions or difficulties and the shapes they used to work with. The Grotowski sect opposing the Barba sect ... And I keep wondering why are they doing this to themselves, why couldn't they laugh at themselves? If you think about yourself too seriously, this is suspicious. This theatre "Vatican" was too fragile. That's why we went back to indigenous communities. We worked with children, with tribal ceremonies and games, and most of all for us to develop forms of essential and creating consciousness. It was important to know why we were doing that. Nietzsche used to say if you have a "why", a "how" becomes clear. So we didn't consciously do theatre, but we were playing games, and most of the time, we were communicating without words, because I don't speak so many indigenous languages.

## **Tell us about the laughter and playfulness in theatre**

We like to laugh a lot, in old communities which were rigid, laughter was suspicious. The emphasis in TDLS was that if we talk to someone, we should talk to listen. We don't like the idea that the public listens to us – I think this is very wrong, very boring; but that we listen to them. That's why we have to play, the more ancient, wise the story, the more naïve and playful it is. Not to take yourself so seriously. Forgetting about fixed structures.

If we understand that the theatre situation is a game, we realise that a game could only develop if there is complicity. The secret means there is a complicity to keep the secret, to create a strength and curiosity out of the secret. But to listen to the secret you cannot invade the others, you should let the others come, let the others share the silence and let the secret be the moment for us. If there is no secret, there is no complicity, and if there is no complicity we cannot develop anything. And it is important not to know the secret. The moment I understand my secret, I am dead. But I know, I need it! The secret enables us to talk, to knock on the door of consciousness.

The main object of our theatrical works is to develop consciousness and a basic interaction between information and experience. If the work is information, it's boring, there is no tension, there is no secret and no work of art. But if the work has two tensions, one stronger and one that makes another tension to oppose it, then there's a point where the two tensions get closer and closer to each other and the tension changes you and the body, there is no words, just the body, in a sensorial situation, five or six senses are not necessary; there is only one sense, not five, only one, with many windows ... and the less clear it is, the better.

And they do this transformation in a way that the existing tension changes both the audience and the performers. And this happens within and with our bodies.

There was one project in Italy, where the work of our actors was to develop a situation, they could hardly see, because they had to give us a dramatic situation that was so far away they had to imagine it and the more difficult it was to see it, the stronger it became. And this is sensorial. And it is the same with sound. Sometimes we feel a sound has to be very present, close to us, and this kills the space. We found the farther away the sound was, the richer the situation. The sound has to be homeopathic, or the image, so we cannot see clearly, the less we see it, the more difficult it was to get to it, the better it was. When we see and hear very clearly, we tend to overreact to those sensations. The more absent we are, the stronger and more sensorial we get. We have to protect our work in front of overacting, overseeing, overhearing, being attacked by so many perverted senses. In that project we learned so many things, definitions are wrong to us ...

And maybe I can finish my introduction to today's symposium with a sentence about **the theatre as a means of developing consciousness, a specific consciousness.**

**Tomaž Toporišič:** Dear Enrique, thank you very much for this highly inspiring introduction opening the spaces for the speakers to come. I would also like to thank Gabriel Hernandez, our dear friend, for being here and sharing this special moment with us here in Maribor.

**Gabriel Hernandez:** Thank you very much Barbara and Tomaž for inviting us and giving us the opportunity to speak about the work of Enrique. We are very happy to be part of the work. I would just like to stress one of the thoughts of Enrique: *"Let us not forget that we must read the best on the silence and the things we don't hear."* Thank you so much for your invitation.

**Tomaž Toporišič:** We will remember and keep repeating this statement. A theatrical festival is always a festivity, even in these circumstances of the pandemic. And our symposium is a reminder that we live in a sensory world, which is theatrical and real at the same time, simultaneously. Once more, I cannot express our gratitude with Barbara, that you took your precious time dear Enrique, to be with us and give us these very inspiring words as well as an occasion to listen to the silences between your words. Your theatrical research and your thoughts are opening important new perspectives on theatre and a singular understanding of the theatre. As your performance (the world première) of *Oracles* in Ljubljana in 1996 changed our perception of the theatre in general, not for just one generation, but for many generations. And even if the circumstances of COVID-19 have made it impossible to welcome you together with our colleagues from the Maribor Theatre Festival to Maribor with your live theatrical performance, we hope to welcome you and Teatro de los Sentidos again in the nearest future.

*The talk and short conversation were transcribed and prepared for the print version by Barbara Pia Jenič and Tomaž Toporišič.*