

Theater

Indigenous Group Presents Lorca Play

Ever since the experiment known as the Peasant Theater Workshop was started in May 1983, many of us had waited anxiously to see one of its productions. We finally got our chance when the group performed in Mexico City to the natural backdrop of the third section of the Chapultepec Woods, on October 24-26.

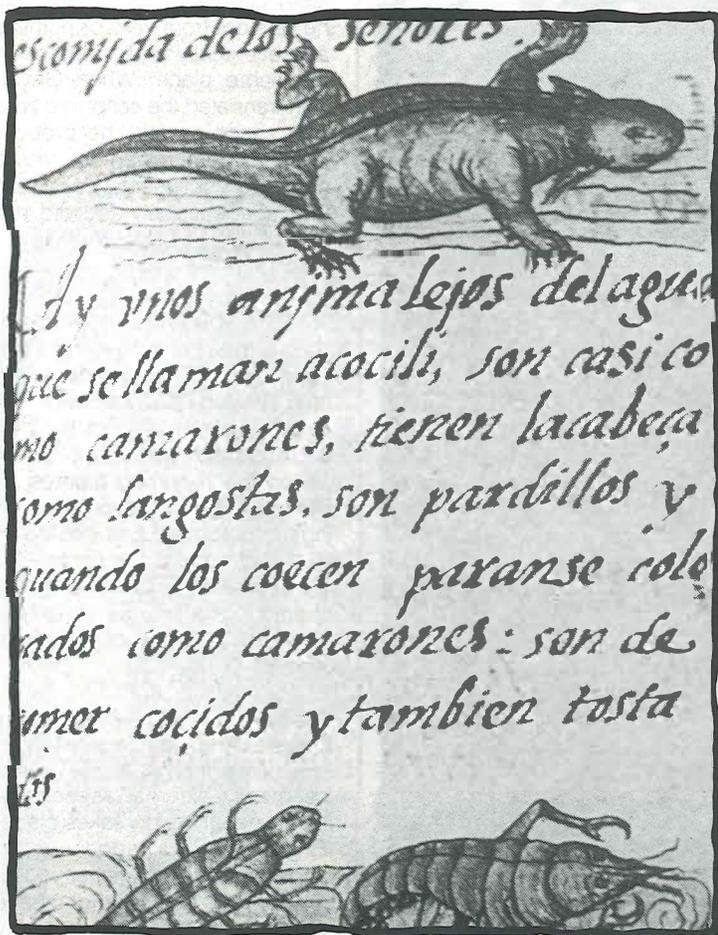
The idea for Peasant Theater originated in the state of Tabasco, based on the desire to create theater from the historical traditions of the peoples living in southeast Mexico, with roots in the rich Mayan, Olmec, Chontal and Chol cultures. Their traditions have been passed along orally through the generations, from the old to the young. The idea is not just to present plays, but rather to create a laboratory based on the region's history, to train actors and teachers, to res-

cue the artistic values of Tabasco, to build the repertoire and to compete in state, national and international theater competitions.

The group is based in Oxolotlan, a small Tabascan town where the tropical jungle hangs from the mountainsides. The experimental group began its work under the direction of Alicia Martínez. Their first challenges were to overcome local resistance and to learn to keep their spirits up under the broiling sun. Once established, they began to take their project to neighboring villages, as well.

The initial group grew into a full-fledged company, developing its own works, the fruits of their efforts to rescue local traditions. One such play is the *Tragedy of the Jaguar*, in which the oral tradition is re-created and transmits the Chontal spirit. Local elders told the story to two of the playwrights, Auldárico Hernández Gerónimo and Eutimio Hernández Guillermo, who working together with the director and an assistant, Martha Alicia Trejos, created the faces and the script, transforming the Chontal voices into credible characters, even though they speak Spanish. Later they got permission from the elders to include certain sacred elements in the play, like the funeral ritual.

But the company's experimental efforts didn't end with the rescue of the traditional, the presentation of ancestral community values, their relationship to the earth, their sense of the sacred and their ancient mysteries. Rather, they began to seek out the



Florentine Codex

"Axolotes" and "Acociles", aztec names of typical Mexican animals.



"A Blood Wedding" in its Oxolotec version

Photo by the Laboratory of the Independent Peasant theater of Tabasco

odds and ends

relationship of the traditional to the universal. That's how they decided to stage Garcia Lorca's *Bodas de Sangre* (*Blood Weddings*), bringing to life his world and feelings, from the perspective of the Oxolotlecán vision. The local community understood the Granadian poet's peasant world as if it were their own, quoting lines from the play for days after the performances. They related easily to his passionate conception of love as an irrepressible vital force, like the tide that inescapably drags the love-stricken girl out to sea and leads to the death of the rivals for her love.

The dramatic staging of the tragic spirit of love and death was given a much slower rhythm than any of us had ever associated with the work before, but which was just right for the play as contemplated from an Oxolotlecán perspective. Fernando Isidro H.'s music sustains this rhythm throughout the play, as popular Mexican music is interwoven into the Spanish text to express the same romantic drama, "for love," "to die for love." The tragic sense of life and of death come together as one, the Spanish village and the people of Mayan roots, able to bless the wheat and the corn growing above the resting dead. It's not a guitar that accompanies the wedding party, but a band and a *marimba*,* which at the moment of death grows quiet and is covered over, as if ashamed by its joy, like the flamenco player who strips the strings from his guitar when a loved one dies.

Lorca would have enjoyed the freshness of the interpretation, with harlequins on horseback, the wedding party in a cart with the band behind it and the chorus repeating, "Wake up the bride, it's her wedding day." He would have been excited by death's prowling presence until at last it controls the stage, with a triumphant gesture of fulfilled destiny as it extends its cape. In Oxolotlán, *Blood Weddings* was staged in a natural setting of jungle and sun. Its haunting beauty remained intact even in the clearing of the Chapultepec Woods, in a stolen silence within the very heart of Mexico City, interrupted only by occasional airplanes overhead. The slow rhythm of the Chontalan drums spoke, as if in another language, of the drama of love and death, the passion of the earth. Lorca's poetry shined

through, not only in the natural simplicity of the spoken verse, but also in the merging of the simplest set components with the movements of horses, the band, the *marimba* and dancers, all on stage. And it was especially present in the outstanding team work and in the participation of a community that understood Lorca's tragedy as its own, both factors adding unique dimensions to the performance.

The Peasant Theater Workshop is not a case of the search for the picturesque, but rather of serious experimental theater, bringing together study, rigor, professionalism and re-creation to construct a work of art. The

company has performed in New York City, during the annual Latin America Theater Festival, winning honors for its work. It has been invited to tour in Spain, Brazil, Cuba and other countries. It is truly an esthetic experience and a privilege to see them perform. We can only hope that their efforts, which have already demonstrated the great potential of peasant theater, will continue without losing quality; that they will not become a mere footnote to the 1986 theater annuals, but that they will go on performing, this being just the start of a long history.★

Emma Rizo

Photo by the Lab of the Independent Peasant Theater of Tabasco



A natural setting for "A Blood Wedding"

* A *marimba* is a xylophone-like instrument, traditional in Mayan culture.