

# FOMMA

## HIDVL ARTIST PROFILES

### Fortaleza de la Mujer Maya Petrona de la Cruz Cruz and Isabel Juárez Espinosa

In 1994, Mayan actresses Petrona de la Cruz (from Zinacantán, Chiapas) and Isabel Juárez Espinosa (from Aguacatenango, Chiapas) founded FOMMA to support Mayan women and children. Using the tools of theater and puppetry, they opened a space where women empower themselves and their culture as they represent the often traumatic experiences they have lived, and imagine alternative realities. FOMMA, a small house in San Cristóbal de las Casas, houses various workshops and soon, a new theatre space. Isabel and Petrona explain that the collective has attempted to meet the needs of women who have left their highland villages in search of work by combining literacy workshops in Spanish and in the Mayan languages of Tzotzil and Tzeltal with skills training in such things as bread-making and sowing, while offering childcare so that the women are free to attend these classes.

Petrona and Isabel learned to read and write as young immigrants to San Cristóbal de las Casas. Their backgrounds are unusual for indigenous women because they have junior high school-level educations. Both Isabel and Petrona were rejected by their communities —Isabel because she had a child out of wedlock, and Petrona because she was a rape victim who raised the child born of that violation. Both supported themselves as domestic servants. Both first practiced theater with the Sna Jtz'ibajom Mayan cultural cooperative in a social climate that discouraged women from speaking publicly of their experiences. There, the two women began to explore community theater as a medium for addressing problems such as domestic violence, rape, alcohol abuse, migration, and poverty as they affect the lives of women.

Petrona de la Cruz Cruz' first play, *Una mujer desesperada* (1991), focuses on the seemingly endless violence visited on Mayan women, and the matter-of-fact impossibility of recourse. She was the first indigenous person to win the coveted Rosario Castellanos Prize for literature in 1992. Isabel Juárez Espinosa is author of *Cuentos y Teatro Tzeltales, A 'yejetik sok Ta 'imal* (1994), and numerous plays.

Petrona's and Isabel's plays have been performed in several countries, and they continue to write and develop new ways to encourage economic and cultural development. In 1999, FOMMA received a national award given by IMIFAP (Mexican Institute of Research on the Family and Population) and sponsored by the Summit Foundation for its work in radio, theater, and education in Mexico.