

Nahuatlismo: The Aztec Method Acting

Jesusa Rodríguez, A conversation with Diana Taylor

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What I'm going to tell you sounds kind of exotic, but it's really the result of my past fifteen years working onstage. I've been tying together the loose ends of a rarely studied and very obscure world: the theater and acting techniques of Mesoamerica. Since I don't know of any studies that deal specifically with Mesoamerican theater, how can I deduce that there's a Mesoamerican acting technique? So this is what I've been working on over the past fifteen years. Alfredo López Austin, in his book *The Human Body and Ideology: The Conceptions of the Ancient Nahuas* (which is the first great systematization of the Mesoamerican worldview), refers to the soul as three entities: Tonalli, Teyolía and Ihíyotl, three souls in the body. One, which is here on the back of the head, is called Tonalli. There is another one in the heart, called Teyolía, and another one in the liver, called Ihíyotl. Each of these souls has its own functions and protective deities. But there are important differences. The Tonalli is the soul that enters and leaves the body; this is the soul that travels while you sleep at night, and then comes back. This is the soul that leaves and comes back every time you sneeze, or whenever you yawn, or when you're startled, it leaves. That's why it's not good to sneeze and keep talking, because when you sneeze, your Tonalli leaves, and you have to wait a little bit, and then it comes back. At that moment, anything can enter your body. However, the soul of the heart and the soul of the liver only leave your body when you die; those two souls will exit only at the exact moment of your death. You will release them like humors.

It's a different worldview and understanding of the human body. When you divide your body in a different way, which isn't the way you're used to dividing it, you feel other things. When you name your body in a different way, you feel it in a different way. Every part of the body is appointed its own function. So for instance, the hand, which is the number five, in Nahuatl is called *macuilli*, meaning "open hand." But at the same time, the other function of the hand, which is to grab, is also named by the hand—"that which grabs." "That which hits" is the fist. The function is in the name. *The Human Body* by Alfredo López Austin is a book you can read your whole life. It was the springboard for my work on all these ideas.

Over time, I began to notice that something was happening to the characters I was developing. Suddenly people started asking me, "How can you look so much like President Salinas, or Carlos Monsiváis, or Marilyn Monroe?" And I'd say no, it's not that I'm identical, because it's not enough for you to just wear the mask or the costume of a certain character to look like him. The question is rather: What goes on beyond the costume?

I started to see where I could take it, and then in López Austin's book I found an interesting function of the liver soul. For example, the Mesoamericans attributed the function of memory to the heart. You remember with your heart. In fact, the Latin root for "remembering" (*recordar*) is "to pass once more through the heart," isn't it? Not necessarily through the brain, which is the ultimate organ for the West. This soul of the heart is the soul that remembers, while the liver soul is the malignant soul, the soul that disguises itself. It is the "nahual." That's where I started to put two and two together.

It sounds totally absurd to say: “Act from your liver.” Nobody would understand what you’re talking about. How can you act from your liver? But many years ago I realized that whenever I was really angry, when something had happened to me, even something stupid—like the gas for the hot water heater hadn’t been delivered, but I had to take a shower to go to the performance, and I’d get angry—when I’d get to the theater with that rage, my emotions flowed incredibly well during the show. Weird, huh? And I would always say, “Rage is a great emotion for actors, because it opens all the channels of expression.” And then of course, I associated rage with the liver, with bile.

Now I’m reading a lot more because the topic of Nahualism is very broad. I asked López Austin what Nahual meant to him. Nahual is something so broad, because Nahual is something we all have, each one of us has his or her own Nahual, that is, your own animal, which is the animal that corresponds to you by birth, by your day, time, year, and place of birth. The Aztecs would read a child’s Tonamatl right after birth. Who will this baby be? This was the tradition, and when children were born they would have their Tonalamatl read, to find out about their destiny, their occupation, and their purpose in life.

When people would ask me how I developed my characters, I’d say well, I never imitate, I don’t watch videos to see what gestures Salinas makes, I simply work with what I remember of the character. Little by little, through the ideas of the ancient Nahuas, I started making connections, because they say that the Nahual is a soul that leaves your body and can steal another person’s essence—or it takes a bite off their essence, and then takes hold of them, of their substance. Each person has his or her own substance. If you manage suck it in, to possess it, then you can reconstruct that person inside you and let it

express itself. I see you, and I leave, and every time I think of Diana, I think of that substance. I don't think of the details of your eyes, or of your body, but I have a substance that is Diana. And if I appeal to that substance, and I use it through my liver, my *Ihiyotl*, my soul that's right here, in my liver, then I can reproduce Diana, and not only can I reproduce her, but I can think like her. If I let the substance that I stole from Diana take its own course, it begins to have a life of its own, its own way of thinking.

During these past eight or ten years, when I've been performing many characters, things have happened to me. For example, I'd tell myself, "This woman will be against the legalization of abortion." Then I'd get up on stage, and the character would say she was in *favor* of legalization! And I'd say to myself, how can this be? I had planned for her to be against it, and now the character is in favor of it—and I couldn't go against the character. Dostoevsky used to say that he constantly created characters that he couldn't stand, who would say things he didn't want to say, but he couldn't betray the characters. I can't betray the characters. Actually, what I'd experience wasn't exactly whether or not to betray them. The characters would betray me. I wanted to say other things, and the characters would articulate a different idea. Suddenly I'd be playing Salinas de Gotari, and he'd answer like a man I didn't know, he'd say things I didn't know, but not like a medium that goes into a trance, but I myself, perfectly conscious, even conscious of how to make it funny, things like: "Sir, it's not the right time, it's not the right time or the right circumstances to answer this question. But let's go to the men's room, and there, with my heart in my hand, I'll give you an answer." Can you imagine! I've never in my life peed like a man, much less in a urinal—oh, because that's what I said to him, I said "from one urinal to another, with my heart in my hand." Of course, it was a joke about having his

penis in his hand, but I was horrified, because I was in an everyday situation for two men, but it was completely foreign to me. And there I was, replying with such ease, as if I'd been peeing in men's bathrooms my whole life. When the show ended, there were people who thought I was a man. One time I was playing the role of Carlos Monsiváis, Mexico's most important cultural theorists, and suddenly my responses were fast and agile, at times I felt I knew secret aspects of Monsiváis. I started to think something was happening, that I was handling other people's substance—which wasn't something external, formal, but something that was really shared, much more internal. When you open up that source, you can improvise much better, because the person speaking is *that person*, right there next to you, another mind is responding inside you. The miracle of the actor is entirely fulfilled: two people in one. Well, this is what I was going to tell you about.