



Natalie Medina, Maritza Vernaza, Marísín Luzcando
photo: Teatro Lagartija

Foto de señoritas y esclusas

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Written by Arístides Vargas. Directed by Arístides Vargas and Charo Francés. Performed by Teatro Lagartija. Teatro Anita Villaláz, Panama City, Panama. 21 March 2010.¹

Born of a transnational interchange between the Panamanian company Teatro Lagartija and Arístides Vargas and Charo Francés of Ecuador's Teatro Malayerba, *Foto de señoritas y esclusas* (*Photograph of Young Women and Locks*) confronts the multilayered physical, emotional, and social traumas stemming from the United States' invasion of Panama

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on 20 December 1989.² A tapestry of ellipses, asides, songs, jokes, children's games, dream sequences, spoken *didaskalia*, misplaced photographs, and Freudian slips, the play illustrates the processes by which "señoras who were señoritas" probe unclosed psychic wounds and rupture boundaries between private, quotidian tragedies, and larger frameworks of collective trauma in a society still reeling from the Noriega dictatorship and the ensuing invasion's bloody retribution.



While the 1989 invasion's carnage was massive, equally upsetting for many Panamanians is the fact that much of the national populace endorsed the US military incursion to oust General Manuel Antonio Noriega, at least at its outset.³ Sociologist Raúl Leis pinpoints the ongoing ambivalence and pervasive ideological fissures as sources of general public silence on the subject: little official recognition is given to the 1989 attacks, whether in the form of memorials, curricula, reparations, or the declaration of a national day of mourning. In a context of disavowal, how can theater approach this political crisis and call forth the dialogue necessary to counteract the play's refrain, that "history repeats itself?"⁴

Blending avant-garde theatrical aesthetics with regionalized references, *Foto de señoritas y esclusas* places a theater of exile and anti-dictatorship in a Panamanian register. Political exiles from Argentina in the 1970s, Vargas and Francés have crafted work that frequently engages themes of forced flight, amnesia, violence, and the need for a 'political intimacy' to overcome divides between the individual and society.⁵ Teatro Lagartija emerged in 2004, coeval with a workshop by Vargas and Francés. Intrigued by Malayerba's "collective creation" and actor-centered, devised dramaturgy, Lagartija members sought to apply these tools to the task of excavating private and public memories of the Noriega years.⁶ Since 2004, the Lagartija project has reached other sites in Central America, linking nations across borders.⁷



In the intimate Anita Villaláz Theater, the five-member cast matched spatial relationships with emotional ones, transmuting their blocking into a language of

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oscillating revelation and concealment. As they pushed through inhibitions and confronted secrets, lapsing into breakdowns of self-control, the women moved to points upstage that felt uncomfortably and importantly close. In a rotating roll of *raisonneurs*, each actor would walk forward to narrate and be in turn sent back into his or her respective scene, a wavelike peristalsis that, along with the constant iteration of unspoken thoughts (bracketing their lines with phrases like “...I think, but don’t say” or “...I say, but no one hears me”), disturbed the play from its bourgeois parlor-room conceits.



Indicating Panama’s history of commercial transactions, neoliberal consumption, multicultural migration, and socioeconomic tensions, the four female characters—upper-class professionals all—straddle the line between humans and humors. Their foil, a male servant, is a “gordito moreno” who observes and manipulates events from the sidelines. Sharpening knives with a sound like machine-gun fire, the ugly and clumsy servant constitutes a veiled reference to Noriega’s humble origins and acne-scarred “pineapple face.” His motions coincide with a leitmotif of sonorous chords as he opens the play, stating, “I am here, but I am not here.” Likewise, he closes the scene, ostensibly leaving, yet lingering with “pending interests.”



Early in the play’s arc, one woman remarks that the transposition of a single letter can transform the meaning of a sentence. Continuing throughout the play, the misplacement of thoughts—intruding unsolicited, or mysteriously absent from the scene—reveals the woman’s active modulation of memories, an operative analogy being the regulation of water levels in the Panama Canal via a system of *esclusas* (locks). Clicking through a jumble of innocuous photographs in a slideshow, the women encounter unwelcome footage of the invasion: bodies piled in a morgue and soldiers pointing guns at civilians. While the servant deftly whisks away the first images, the slideshow eventually becomes stuck on a pivotal photo of a US soldier. As the women react to this image, attributing its presence to the failures of the projector’s “memory,” images of brutality overtake the benign, forcing a rupture.

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The characters' solution is to narrate the photographic archive, identifying "the first photograph of the invasion[...]the second photograph of the invasion," and so on. This opening leads the women to center-stage and to new recognitions of their relationships to the violence. As the women are stripped of their locks, the waters of memory rush in, carving an irrevocably changed landscape.

Katherine Zien is a PhD candidate in Northwestern University's Interdisciplinary Program in Theatre and Drama (IPTD). She received her B.A. in English literature in 2004 from Columbia University. Her work treats themes of migration, spatial semiotics, and cultural and racial identity in Latin American and Caribbean theatre history, and her dissertation explores the history of US-Panama relations through a site-specific analysis of theatre and performance in the former Panama Canal Zone. Katherine's work has been published in *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies*, and she is the recipient of a 2009-2010 Fulbright IIE dissertation research fellowship. She may be contacted at kazien@gmail.com.

Notes

¹ The play has thus far been performed on four occasions: February 12-13, 2009 (Teatro Anita Villaláz), May 13-30, 2009 (ibid), December 20, 2009 (Auditorio Ascanio Arosemena), and March 21, 2010 (Teatro Anita Villaláz). The performance on 20 December, commemorated the twentieth anniversary of the 1989 invasion and was staged in a crucial location, the former United States-administrated high school in Balboa that was the epicenter of the 1964 Canal Zone Flag Riots. Although I was also present at this performance, spatial constraints limit my discussion here to the March 21, 2010 performance at the Villaláz.

² The 1989 invasion, called "Operation Just Cause," carpeted General Manuel Antonio Noriega's headquarters, and surrounding densely populated residential neighborhoods such as El Chorrillo, with roughly 440 bombs in a disproportionate show of force, meant to oust the Panamanian dictator and shock the nation-state (Raúl Leis, ["A veinte años del horror," Panamá Profundo](#) 18 December 2009).

³ Conservative estimates state that roughly 700 people died, though the actual death tolls likely reached the thousands, the violence compounded by the images and odors of

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decomposing corpses overflowing the morgues of the centrally located Hospital Santo Tomás (Virgilio Araúz, [“A 20 Años de la Criminal Invasión.”](#) *Panamá Profundo*, 18 December 2009).

⁴ “El pasado/nos vuelve a pasar,” from the song “Probadita de eternidad,” variations written and performed by Liliana Felipe and Susana Zabaleta.

⁵ See Malayerba’s self-produced documentary film, “[Malayerba: 25 años de teatro](#)” (2004); Hemispheric Institute Digital Video Library.

⁶ See Maritza Vernaza, “Conversatorio Sobre el Estado del Teatro en Panamá,” 22 March 2010. Teatro La Quadra, Panama City, Panama.

⁷ Recently, as with the production *Tres Viejos Mares*, Vargas and Francés have sought to consciously foster productions with cast members from different parts of Central America; in this case, Guatemalan, Honduran, and El Salvadoran performers shared the stage.