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Places of Performance:

Images and Ideas from the Hemispheric Institute Encuentro

By Raphael Soifer

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BUENOS AIRES– "The only difference between a madman and a performance artist," Guillermo Goméz-Peña tells us in a raspy, Mexican-accented baritone, "is that a performance artist has an audience." He thanks us, half beaming, half sneering, "for not letting me go mad," and gazes out at the more than 300 people standing and watching him, in rapt attention, in the crammed Sala Villa-Villa performance space at the Centro Cultural Recoleta in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Then he — or in his words, "the global administration" — invites us to circulate throughout the space to see what else is going on.

Guillermo's performance collective, La Pocha Nostra, is presenting *Mapa/Corpo 2*, which, according to the program notes, is a "response to the era of paranoid nationalism instituted by the Bush administration." ("*Pocha*" or "*pocho*" is a derogatory slang term for a Mexican who has immigrated to the United States and assimilated to American culture). While Guillermo — wearing a simple black dress, decorative cuffs, and a headdress that is part Aztec god's crown and part aviator's helmet — intones from a central platform bathed in beams of cold blue light, a large screen behind him shows, in real time, the action in the rest of the performance space. A few meters to his right, Amapola Prada, a slight Peruvian dressed in simple black pants with a white cross painted over her bare torso, washes Roberto Sifuentes, a Los Angelino clad only in a gauze loincloth smeared with red paint. Roberto, whose forearms and lower legs are also painted blood red, reclines on an altar of flowers, gas masks, bones, and toy guns. Across the performance space, María Estrada, from Barranquilla, Colombia, lies naked on an examination table under a United Nations flag. As the performance progresses, Andrés Vinciauskas — an Argentine acupuncturist — slowly lifts the flag off Estrada's body as he gently and methodically turns her skin into a landscape of needles decorated with American, British, and Israeli flag decals.

"The only difference...:" Guillermo Goméz-Peña in Mapa/Corpo 2.

La Pocha Nostra has come to Buenos Aires for a ten-day gathering — part academic conference, part performance festival, part art exhibition, part political symposium — sponsored by the New York-based Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics, entitled "*Corpolíticas*: Body Politics in the Americas." Based at New York University, the Hemispheric Institute has 19 member universities in seven countries, and includes the participation of academics and artists from throughout the Western Hemisphere. The Institute is among the most prominent consortia dedicated to Performance Studies, an interdisciplinary (or "post-disciplinary") approach that draws primarily on theatre, cultural studies, and the social sciences and that, in large part, was born at NYU.

The Hemispheric Institute defines its mission as an attempt "to shift the paradigm of knowledge production and circulation to include embodied practice as a way of creating and transmitting cultural values, memory, and identity." In other words, the Institute is committed to building bridges outside the ivory tower, principally by including performers as participants in refining and expanding the field of Performance Studies. Since 2000, the Institute has held regular "Encuentros" — heady, somewhat crazed blends of performance practice and academic theory — in countries throughout the Americas. "Corpolíticas," the Buenos Aires Encuentro, is the sixth. I've come to Buenos Aires for the opportunities offered by the Encuentro, where I take in presentations by some of the leading performers in the Americas; network with similarly-inclined artists and scholars from across Latin America, the United States, and Canada; share a small sample of my own work; and get a clearer sense of some the common obstacles and strategies that bring together performance practitioners from throughout the Hemisphere.

María Estrada and Andrés Vinciauskas in Mapa/Corpo 2

A typical day at a Hemispheric Institute Encuentro has a lot in common with *Mapa/Corpo 2*, at least in terms of sensory overload. It's packed with events that aren't easy to understand, and images that simultaneously captivate and confuse. Programming begins at 9:30 almost every morning, and rarely finishes before midnight (not counting the after-hours cabaret). In addition to *Mapa/Corpo 2*, the Encuentro features 67 other performance, dance, and installation pieces, as well as seven keynote lectures, 12 round table discussions, a variety of workshops, work groups, art exhibits, films, and — most days — free time for dinner (never for lunch). The Encuentro's participants come from throughout the Americas, and where feasible — in lectures and symposia — Encuentro events feature simultaneous translation into English, Spanish, and Portuguese.

The performances at the Encuentro are not uniformly good, but several are excellent, and as a whole, they provide at least one radical insight per day. They overshadow the academic content, which not only fails to "shift the paradigm of knowledge production," but also tends not to produce very much knowledge. Over the course of ten days, however, the performances are provocative, challenging, and inspiring. They question the place of the human body in the modern world, bringing unity to the Encuentro in their common demands for the sanctity of the body, the individual, and the communities to which they belong.

At its best, the field of Performance Studies serves as a useful frame for examinations outside of traditional academic disciplines. Most work in the field branches out in two directions. The first focuses on understanding events that most people would easily recognize as performance, such as plays, concerts, or ritual dances. The second moves away from limiting performance to professional practitioners, and identifies aspects of performance in daily rituals and quotidian spaces. Performance Studies does not divide itself neatly in two. Much of the best work juxtaposes recognized veins of performance alongside hidden or quotidian aspects of "performativity," in which entire ritual frames of reference are embedded in simple phrases or actions.

My own work with Performance Studies is based primarily in theatre and anthropology, the "granddaddy" subjects of the field. I think of Performance Studies as a constantly evolving how-to guide for melding artistic practice with public involvement. Although I'm interested primarily in experimental performance genres like street theatre and performance art, my sense of what constitutes a given performance encompasses the creative process, the backgrounds of the performers, and the history of the community that makes up the audience. Focusing on community-based performance initiatives in poor and underserved locales, I've worked with projects that help restore community pride, preserve local traditions and create opportunities for community members to affect change. Especially in my work in prisons, I've also used performance to help create a sense of community among groups of disparate individuals who share circumstances and a living space, but lack a common bond.

The relationships between performance and community are central to Performance Studies, and the Hemispheric Encuentro raises a number of questions of the efficacy and practice of community performance. To begin, those of us participating in the Encuentro form a default community. The Encuentro's rituals, ranging from the formalities of introducing ourselves in workgroups to the experience of participating in performance pieces like *Mapa/Corpo 2*, help shape our understanding of this "sudden community" and our place in it.

Like all communities (and all academic conferences), the Encuentro risks closing in on itself. The pace and organization of the Encuentro makes it difficult for participants to become familiar with the communities all around us in Buenos Aires. Furthermore, the Centro Cultural Recoleta, where most of the conference is based, is a remarkably closed location, especially for a gathering that so values the concept of opening arts to the community. Three or four unsmiling men in uniforms guard the venue whenever the conference is in session, and they usually refuse admission to anyone without an official participant's badge. On a few lazy afternoons and for the opening and closing sessions, the Centro Cultural allows members of the public to browse the exhibits on the ground floor, but for the most part, conference participants are in a bubble. The effect is replicated at the Teatro Empire — the downtown venue for most evening and late-night performances — where a strict ushering crew double-checks our credentials every night. Coupled with the long days and the relative dearth of local performers, the exclusivity of the Encuentro's venues leaves many participants with only a vague sense of contemporary Buenos Aires.

Our limited contact with local communities is a minor reflection of a major theme of the conference: that of missing or absent bodies. Most of the Argentine performances and exhibits that make it to the Encuentro reflect at least in part on the legacy of the Dirty War, the period from 1976-1983 in which an estimated 30,000 Argentines were "disappeared" at the hands of one of Latin America's most brutal dictatorships. The legacy of disappearances is evident everywhere at the Encuentro: in the program notes; in performances and lectures; in the sign outside the Centro Cultural Recoleta bearing the names of torture camps and prisons; and in exhibits of snapshots of the disappeared along with news photos from the 1970s.

Two members of the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, surrounded by Encuentro participants with digital cameras.

The Porteño (native to Buenos Aires) arts and intellectual communities seem particularly close to the disappeared, but the stain of the Dirty War is evident nearly everywhere in Buenos Aires. Plaques along the street mark the locations where, decades ago, individuals or small groups were last seen. Every Thursday, members of the Madres de la Plaza — a group founded by mothers of the disappeared — walk slowly around the Plaza de Mayo in their signature white headscarves. Even the official Encuentro hotel, built in the late 1970s and not renovated since, seems like a melancholy time capsule.

"Embodied memory" — a major buzzword in Performance Studies, which refers to memories carried in and made visible through individual bodies — is a central theme throughout the Encuentro. In some cases, embodied memories take the form of rituals involving traditional performance. Much more frequently at the Encuentro, embodied memories surface as the performed scars of violence. June 9th, the first full day of the conference, closes with a performance that captures both tradition and trauma within embodied memory. *Kay Punku*, by Grupo Yuyachkani — a 36-year-old performance ensemble that is Peru's premiere theatre troupe — focuses on two women, one of whom appears to have suffered incredible physical violation. The performance takes the shape of a purification ceremony, allowing the performers a chance to both acknowledge the trauma they have suffered, and to cleanse themselves and their audience of it.

Accompanied by a male musician at the far stage-left corner playing traditional Andean songs, the performers Ana and Debora Correa begin the piece by spreading herbs and plants around the stage and uncovering stones inscribed with women's names. As *Kay Punku* progresses, Debora enters, crying and slumped, through a door that she has carried across the stage. Ana conducts an elaborate cleansing ritual, painstakingly washing Debora with a cloth, and singing softly as Debora's body slowly straightens and her face comes to life. Ana washes patches of the stage, and decorates the doorway with wildflowers as both women finally begin laughing and pass a basket of sweet oranges around the audience. The performance culminates with a sense of vitality, with Debora's physical reawakening seemingly reflected in the smell of citrus that seems to transform the dingy old Teatro Empire into a completely new, bright space. The act of sharing the oranges joins the audience into a more complete community, one that has witnessed an important ceremony and become a part of it. Onstage, Ana and Debora Correa have subverted an embodied memory of violence and violation, substituting it with another of a powerful and whole woman.

Embodied memory is also visible in the passing glances of Buenos Aires that I catch between Encuentro events. Porteños still regard the police with tremendous fear, even more than I've seen in Rio de Janeiro. When a cab driver hustling me toward a lecture at the Centro Cultural sees two cops manning a detour for roadwork in the Recoleta neighborhood, he stops short and quickly turns down what turns out to be the wrong side street, refusing to stop and ask them for directions. When a group of roughly a dozen black-clad federal police officers appears right outside the Hotel Bauen (the main hotel for the conference) on June 18th as a sizeable chunk of Encuentro participants wait to check out. The chatty lobby — filled almost exclusively with foreigners — suddenly falls silent.

During the Encuentro, I keep repeating to myself the Isadora Duncan quote: "If I could say it, I wouldn't have to dance it." I am struck not only by the power of expressing memory through the body, but also by the limitations of language. It's not surprising that images of the body would stand out at a conference dedicated to "Corpolíticas," or that, in a tri-lingual community of 400 people, images would become the most memorable aspects of performances. Still, I am surprised by the relative weakness of language, as well as by the strategies that some of the most successful performances find to subvert or re-examine it.

During *Mapa/Corpo 2*, for example, Guillermo's speech mixes personal reminisces, preaching, political content, irony and sincerity, as well as English and Spanish. It's essentially a monologue, but coupled with the action in the Sala Villa-Villa, the words seems less important than the images that go with them. He finishes his litany with a call-and-response session, yelling out, in a mixture of triumph and rage, "God bless...!" while audience members, glancing between his pulpit and Roberto and María's prostrate bodies, fill in the blanks: "God bless!" "...Haiti!" "God bless!" "...Venezuela!"

Later, Guillermo summons audience members into the action, inviting us to step forward and "write on an immigrant's [Roberto Sifuentes'] body" with lipstick and permanent markers. Soon, we have transformed Roberto into a multi-lingual tapestry. There is no exposition or narrative, no order to what we write, what languages we use, or where on Roberto's body we leave our messages. There are, however, vestiges of our presence and participation that, like a graffiti-covered wall, tell an abstract, imagistic story at the same time as they serve almost to brand Roberto's motionless figure.

This sort of audience participation is central to *Mapa/Corpo 2*, during which many of us seem to turn into parishioners of the Church of La Pocha Nostra. Early Christian chants play in the background as Guillermo looks out silently over the action, his face almost beatific. Soon, he invites us to "gently, tenderly" remove the acupuncture needles from María Estrada's body. After the needles are out and Roberto is covered in written messages, María and Roberto slowly rise to join their persecutors (or caretakers), and the couples on either side of the performance space stand and gaze into each other's eyes. The Sala Villa-Villa is at once charged with energy and filled with reverence. The performance reclaims the sacredness of the human body, even through actions that seem to defile it.

For an assembly devoted to "the body," the Encuentro wreaks havoc on the bodies of most its participants. The vast majority of us — aside from the *Porteños* (locals) — are under-prepared for the cold of an Argentine winter, with grey skies during the day and lows at night dropping to near the freezing mark. The Centro Cultural Recoleta has inadequate heating, and though La Pocha Nostra and some others manage to rig their performances with space heaters, we soon learn to wear all available layers of clothing. The scheduling leaves almost all of us exhausted, and the combination of cold and sleep deprivation leads a number of Encuentro participants to bed for long stretches of time battling nasty colds and flus. I manage to keep my own pre-existing cold at bay until I return to São Paulo, where it returns with full force almost as soon as I make it back to my apartment.

With no time to attend workshops and workgroups and still eat lunch, many of us became overly reliant on

Amapola Prada and Roberto Sifuentes in Mapa/Corpo 2 the Centro Cultural snack machine, which dispenses an impressive number of variations on Argentina's national snack food, the *alfajor*. Classic *alfajores* are dessert sandwiches of sponge cake or cookies with *dulce de leche* (caramel-flavored) filling, covered in chocolate. As an occasional snack, they are fantastic, but after a week of two or three for lunch everyday, the all-*fajores* diet loses much of its appeal.

On a much graver note, the Centro Cultural experiences the physical repression that so much of the Encuentro's content recalls. Two members of FOMMA (*Fortaleza de la Mujer Maya* – Strength of the Mayan Woman), an in-

Alfajores, *all the time*

digenous women's theatre collective from Chiapas state in Mexico, present four short performances on the first day of the Encuentro, and spend part of each remaining day selling beautiful textiles from their community after performances at the Teatro Empire and in front of the Centro Cultural. In spite of the women's credentials, the Centro Cultural guards harass them constantly. At one point, a guard shoves them, snatches their craftwork, and throws it on the ground. FOMMA's members, whose appearances and accents make them targets of suspicion in primarily white, colonial Buenos Aires, are obvious outsiders in a gathering that deals extensively with questions of traditional communities, but whose participants mostly come from privileged backgrounds. They are accustomed to harassment in Chiapas, but — even as featured performers at an international conference — they are not protected from it in Argentina.

The incident shocks Encuentro participants, and highlights FOMMA's members' isolation from their own community, as well as the limitations of the community formed at the Encuentro. As a counterpoint, Grupo Yuyachkani's *Kay Punku* underscores the vital role of community involvement in the healing process. During a post-performance talkback, Ana and Debora Correa explain that Yuyachkani created the piece primarily for the rural Andean communities most affected by decades of violence and civil war in Peru. For these communities, *Kay Punku* is not an isolated performance, but part of an elaborate, three-day ritual healing process that Yuyachkani conducts with the participation of community members. On the first day, the troupe presents traditional stories for all members of the community. On the second, they perform *Kay Punku* for an audience made up exclusively of local women. Finally, they conduct a healing and reunification ritual for the women. Yuyachkani's work calls on a vision of performance in which community members are recipients of, participants in, and producers of performance.

Lois Weaver, a member of the American feminist performance group Split Britches, hosts two presentations that are at once popular ritual and community forum. Her "Long Table" is both an interactive performance and an extension of the all-too-familiar "roundtable." Lois says the format is based on a dinner party conversation. Participants sit at or near a table covered in paper — with markers close at hand for a written dialogue — and simply converse in response to a general prompt. Anyone taking part in the performance is free to take a seat at the table or to leave, so that the speakers change constantly. Lois circulates copies of a list of "Long Table Etiquette" before the session starts, which includes: "There is no beginning;" "There is no hostess;" "It is a democracy;" "There can be laughter;" "There is no conclusion."

The theme for the first Long Table, on June 11th, is "Manufacturing Bodies." In accordance with Long Table Etiquette ("The menu is up to you"), the conversation shifts regularly, covering everything from strategies of working with disadvantaged young people to personal physical transformations. The ages, nationalities, languages, and experiences of those sitting around the table reconfigure constantly. The Long Table exhibits one of the best uses of language at the Encuentro, and it is one of the only events that puts the simultaneous translators to good use. There is laughter, deep insight, and personal stories from across years and backgrounds. Only one point of Etiquette is ignored: "There can be silence."

The second Long Table ("Violence and the Politics of Repression") begins with Sinuhé, a Mexican musician and performer, recounting his experience entering Argentina

Tri-lingual notes/graffiti/dialogue on the Long Table by bus a few weeks before the Encuentro. At the border with Bolivia, Argentine federal police detained Sinuhé along with three Bolivian teenagers who each admitted to smuggling a kilogram of cocaine in balloons inside their stomachs. The border police threatened to "kick in their stomachs" to break the balloons and provoke a fatal overdose. When Sinuhé asked to speak with a Mexican consular official, border police responded by forcing him into a variety of stress positions. Later, they changed their initial charges, accusing Sinuhé of robbery instead of smuggling. After keeping him in custody for close to 11 hours, the police finally released him and allowed him to proceed to Buenos Aires. When he went to reclaim his belongings, he found that his wallet was empty.

Sinuhé's story triggers denunciation of police tactics, as well as calls for an official Encuentro response, and anecdotes from other Encuentro participants who have suffered similar mistreatment. Many of us are upset by Sinuhé's story, though few of us are surprised. We are struck that such a blatant misuse of power could occur en route to a gathering devoted to questioning the role of performance in remembering, revealing, and combating such abuses. Luis Peironi Falconí, the Dean of the Communications Department at Pontifica Universidad Cátolica del Perú, takes the microphone to caution against assuming that we can solve everything with good intentions. "There are performances ratifying horror and performances fighting horror," he says. "Just because it's performance doesn't necessarily mean that it's good." Like *Kay Punku*, the Long Table serves as both a register of horror and a strong denunciation of it. Over the course of the event, participants join in a simple but powerful verbal performance that strengthens us as members of a community.

Falconí's observation is even stronger because of the setting. Performances that stand out most at the Encuentro are those that challenge themselves and their genres. On the surface, the Long Table, *Kay Punku*, and La Pocha Nostra's *Mapa/Corpo 2* share almost nothing in common, but each performance culminates in interactive rituals designed to question the role of power in contemporary society, and to reassert the body as the foundation of communities. It may be, as Guillermo says in *Mapa/Corpo 2*, that a performance artist is merely a madman (or madwoman) with an audience. At the Encuentro, though, many of the performances are provocative, beautiful, or terrifying enough to help unify their audience, and help us reclaim our own sanity.

Another important vein of community performance is the work of local, non-professional artists. At the Encuentro, the most powerful example of such work comes on the second night, when Encuentro participants cram into chartered buses to La Boca, Buenos Aires' famous bohemian neighborhood, for the Catalinas Sul community theatre group's performance of *El Fulgor Argentino* (*The Argentine Glow*). The play is a stylized recounting of 100 years of Porteño and Argentine history (1930 — 2030) as seen through the lens of the daily life of *"El Fulgor Argentino,"* a fictional social club. With over 100 performers on most nights — the presentation we see on June 11th features a paltry 70-something — *El Fulgor* bridges the "let's put on a show!" sensibility frequently found in local theatre with the huge cast, precise choreography, and infectious song and dance of a Broadway musical. In addition, the piece features the populist, grassroots politics at the heart of many community performance initiatives. The show is a detailed introduction to Argentine social, cultural, and political history expressed through a wide range of musical and dance styles.

El Fulgor Argentino begins with a feast served by community members. We pay a little bit for each item — quiche and pizza for the vegetarians, stews or huge slabs of beef for the carnivores — and the food is excellent. Because we're in Argentina, our picnic-style meal in a working-class neighborhood also features an extensive wine list. The grub reflects the style of the show: *El Fulgor* is hearty and unpretentious, but as rich as the decadent chocolate cake placed, for maximum temptation, next to the payment tills.

Surprisingly for a 100-year historical survey, *El Fulgor* is well paced: not rushed, but never dragging. The humor relies largely on caricatures, which the cast pulls off exquisitely. These include local drunks, high society figures, and jack-booted soldiers (portrayed by a row of life-sized foam puppets on a wire, controlled by an actor roped into the middle) who march through in an early scene set in the 1940s. The soldiers are buffoons, but they serve as eerie forerunners to the Dirty War scenes that we

Sinuhé at the Long Table

A priest commands the puppet army in El Fulgor Argentino*.*

all know to expect. When the action reaches the 1970s, the narrative tone shifts from exaggerated to restrained, and the sense of absence is overwhelming. In hushed scenes, the number of bodies onstage diminishes until only the club manager is left, surveying a vast emptiness bathed in cold light, sweeping floors and polishing tables for club members that both he and the audience know will not return.

On June 14^{th}, after the second Long Table, the Encuentro reconvenes downtown to join the Asociacion Madres de la Plaza de Mayo — the mothers of the disappeared, now mostly in their 70s and 80s — in their weekly rotation, unbroken since the Dirty War. The Madres, in their white headscarves, are undoubtedly the most persistent and visible reminders of the Dirty War in Buenos Aires, and probably in the country. Decades after the dictatorship, their unrelenting physical presence on the Plaza is a devastating testament to the fact that their children remain missing.

It's a cold day, and by the time we make it to the Plaza de Mayo, it has already begun to drizzle. After years of hearing about the Madres' force and persistence, I am struck by how completely the Encuentro participants outnumber the women in white handkerchiefs, who this day number fewer than ten. As the women address the crowd, warning about the potential fallout of the upcoming election for chief of government of Buenos Aires, it's hard not to see this vivid embodiment of memory, this font of resistance, quietly fading as an oblivious city hurries on around it. Maybe the Madres are such a fixture in the Plaza that residents have ceased to notice them.

Later that night, the Encuentro features an Argentine performer with close family ties to the disappeared whose presence is inescapably vibrant. Liliana Felipe — a musician, singer, and composer who has lived in Mexico since 1975 — presents a concert at the Teatro Empire that, together with the Long Table, makes the best case for language-based performance at the Encuentro. Her songs are rife with wordplay, scathing satire, and bitingly clever observations, yet Liliana's delivery and sense of musicality seem capable of transcending the language barrier. Even when I can't follow what she's singing about, her lilting sarcasm and impeccable timing are enough to carry her jokes, and her gruff voice conveys beauty and wonder juxtaposed to a sense of loss.

The next day, I buy "Trucho," one of Liliana's recent CDs. On the back of the jewel case is a photo of Ester Felipe — a sister who could easily pass for a younger Liliana — with the caption "Disappeared on the 10^{th} of January, 1977, in Argentina." A few Google searches reveal that Ester and her husband were both disappeared from different locations on the same night, leaving their 25-day-old baby an orphan. Many of Liliana's songs are the musical equivalent of the Madres de la Plaza's processions, serving as living memories of what she and Argentina have lost.

Liliana's music, however, refuses to accept victimhood and has the ability — even if only inside a concert hall — to transform an accustomed power dynamic.

The memory of a memory: white handkerchiefs, commemorating the Madres de la Plaza*, painted on the bricks of the Plaza de Mayo.*

Liliana Felipe (at the piano, with a wry grin) performs her fourth encore, together with her wife and frequent co-conspirator, Jesusa Rodríguez.

Midway through the concert, Liliana performs a rousing, ecstatically irreverent 30-second biography of the Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet, entitled "Viejo de Mierda" (Old Shit), noting gleefully, "Even his name ends in *shit*... Pino-*shit*!" For the duration of the concert, the dictators of the world are mere targets for Liliana's wit. Pinochet becomes nothing more than the punch line to her scatological jokes.

Liliana's success is not solely linguistic. She transforms the bare stage at the Teatro Empire so that it is alternately a tango club, a lecture hall, a front porch, or an otherworldly cabaret. She's in complete command of the stage, of her audience, and of her subject matter. This control is coupled, however, with the sad recognition of the power and legacy of the *viejos de mierda* who Liliana reduces to their proper size.

I arrive at the Encuentro planning to create impromptu presentations, in a variety of spaces, of one week's worth of short plays from the *365 Days, 365 Plays* project by the renowned American playwright, Suzan-Lori Parks. From November 13, 2002 until November 12, 2003, Parks —who received the 2002 Pulitzer Prize in Drama for her play *Topdog/Underdog* — wrote a short play every day for a year, ranging from mini-musicals and choreopoems to minimalist, wordless theatre, sometimes all within the space of a few days. Along with the producer and director Bonnie Metzgar, Parks has turned the project into a yearlong smorgasbord for theatres across the United States. Since November 13, 2006, hundreds of companies and venues, ranging from New York's acclaimed SITI Company to the small, itinerant International Theatre Collective in Boulder, Colorado, have each staged a week of the work.

In putting on a week of plays from the *365 Days, 365 Days Project*, there's no picking and choosing content. As soon as I sign up, I have committed to all eight plays that comprise Week 31 (June 11-17, with two plays on the 14th). Some of them inspire me immediately. *Show Me the Weapons of Mass Destruction*, the play for June 12th, portrays a surreal, Twilight Zone-meets-*Leave It to Beaver* family watching TV, worrying about the possible consequences of their young son's subversive comments. Others, like the dialogue-heavy *Watergate*, a snapshot from the later life of the guard who first discovered the synonymous break-in, worry me: how will a non-American audience respond?

Hearing Suzan-Lori Parks speak just after performances of the project began, I was inspired by her concept of "radical inclusion," of offering her plays to all interested parties regardless of their history, capabilities, and location (albeit with copyright protections). At the Encuentro, I hope to use the project to explore community formation and the implicit rules of private and public spaces at locations throughout Buenos Aires, relying on volunteers at the Encuentro as performers. I also plan on presenting each play in English, Spanish, and Portuguese. In comparison to the difficulties posed by preparing decent translations of the scripts, the challenge of assembling a company on the spot feels as though it ought to be relatively simple. There is a randomness to the *365* project that, to my mind, meshes well with the pace and style of the Encuentro. I plan to arrive with scripts and basic staging plans, and leave the rest to serendipity and a theatrically appropriate reliance on the kindness of strangers.

As it happens, scheduling becomes a major obstacle at the Encuentro. Fog delays most flights, including mine, by at least a day, leaving me significantly less time to prepare. Over the course of the Encuentro, I barely manage to gather a small group of actors to stage scenes throughout the day of June 14th, when conference organizers have scheduled an afternoon of performance on the downtown Plaza del Congresso, directly in front of Argentina's Parliament building.

The Plaza del Congresso is about a 20-minute walk from the Plaza de Mayo, and as soon as the Madres have left in their van, the Encuentro — *en masse* —starts walking north. A few performers stand me up on the day of the event, leaving their slightly rehearsed plays unperformed, but together with a group of brave and able volunteers, I manage to stage two plays on the plaza. The first, *Homecoming Forever,* features a Homecoming Queen pondering eternity, smiling as a spotlight trained on her slowly fades. The second, *The Great Wave Off Kanagawa,* is a monologue about the nature of art, told from the perspective of the Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai's painting. I arrange four homecoming queens (male and female, myself included) in white face paint and red skirts as a wave, reciting their lines between the Great Wave's reflections. We alternate languages throughout, and while it's unclear if any of the passers-by take in any of the text, the image of a woman with a toy karaoke machine followed by a line of multi-lingual, mixed-gender homecoming queens seems to intrigue Encuentro participants as well as Porteños not forewarned about the multitude of performances poised to take over their Plaza.

Around us, meanwhile, the Plaza del Congresso explodes into action. Maicyra Leão, from Brasília, is wandering around in an artificial grass suit with a watering can. Gonzalo Rabanal, a Chilean performer and visual artist, is lifting up squares of wet black cloth from the ground and slamming them furiously back down. Jay Critchley, an American performer and massage therapist, organizes a throng of at least fifty people to don surgical masks, across which they've written words or phrases describing their deepest fears. Elsewhere, a good-sized group waving placards forms a roving protest-performance entitled *Ninguna Mujer nace para Puta* (No Woman is Born to be a Whore), created by the Bolivian feminist collective *Mujeres Creando* (Women Creating). Enviously, I note that the folks who demand the least time commitment seem to be the ones with the most participants in their pieces.

Maicyra Leão performs Experimentos Gramíneos *(Grassy Experiments) on the Plaza del Congresso (photograph by Gaby Wolodarski)*

The Encuentro, like any community, has its celebrities and "cool kids," but few, if any, of the "cool kids" use their celebrity status to separate themselves from the pack. (Guillermo, constantly surrounded by a bevy of admirers, couldn't even if he wanted to). The celebrities among us show up to most events, and are conspicuously attentive, making the Encuentro a far more democratic setting than, for example, the average American poetry slam.

Still, the Encuentro can't vanquish altogether the culture of celebrity. About half an hour into the Plaza de Mayo performances, the Reverend Billy arrives. The alter ego of American performance artist Bill Talen, Reverend Billy is a living, breathing incarnation of a 1970s televangelist, with a calling to deliver his people from the forces of globalization. Together with his loosely-assembled "Church of Stop Shopping," the Reverend, in his bell-bottomed suits and duck-bill haircut, is best known for his anti-consumerist preaching in New York City's Starbucks stores, and for his resulting epic arrest record. Within minutes of his arrival, the other performances stop. A crowd of at least a hundred of us follow the Reverend to the front of a local McDonald's — closed because of a sudden power outage — where he delivers a sermon punctuated by frequent shouts of the Church of Stop Shopping's trademark *"Changelujah!"*

I wonder — while shouting along with Billy's sermon — whether a tall blond man in a white suit holding forth in English in front of a dimly lit McDonald's could have much significance for the average Porteño pedestrian. I wonder whether any of the interventions leave non-Encuentro participants with more than a sense of bizarre things happening on their streets, of being outsiders in their own city. Introducing new elements of interaction with people and spaces is a powerful aspect of public performance, but I worry that the amount of ruckus on the Plaza del Congresso might prove self-defeating. I hope that an image or word or concept from one the performances will stick with some of the folks who happen to wander into them, that they will provoke something other than puzzlement, that, if nothing more, the performances might be a single factor in changing someone's awareness of public space. Walking back to our downtown hotel as the persistent drizzle turns to torrential downpour, I remain hopeful, but unconvinced.

Mario Lamothe (a PhD candidate at Northwestern and performer in 365 Days, 365 Plays), the Reverend Billy (with Raphi's toy karaoke machine), and the author after the June 14th street performances (photograph by Gaby Wolodarski).

Later that night, I present *Show Me the Weapons of Mass Destruction*, another *365* play, in my 1970s avocado-green hotel room. The afternoon's performances focused on public space. I stage the nighttime performance — the story of

Noah Dobin-Bernstein and Catherine Killingsworth (in bed) with audience members after a hotel room performance of 365 Days, 365 Plays.

the family with a young subversive son — as a meditation on privacy. A significant part of the under-40 crowd shows up, and keeps coming. We run through five performances (two in English and Spanish, and one in Portuguese) with an ever-expanding audience, creating the effect of an extended family gathered around a core unit, all staring at the TV. The performance generates conversation, which generates a chance for people to make new connections, often across language barriers. *Show Me the Weapons* is an attempt to capture something that the Long Table succeeds so admirably in doing: creating bonds through performance, and using these interactions to bring new ideas closer to fruition.

On the final night, I have the opportunity to watch what may be the best synthesis of new ideas and familiar themes at the Encuentro. *United Nations Dance Jeopardy*, a performance installation by my friends Miriam and Gaby Wolodarski, is simple yet powerful. Described in the program notes as a "fun/funny game revolving around translation and structure," the interactive piece feels like a combination of strip poker and a visit with a contemporary oracle. The performance relies on participation, briefly joining audience members together with the performers. It also uses relies on the body to supersede spoken language. Although the piece deals with translation, and Miriam and Gaby are native speakers of both Spanish and English, language is tied to image throughout the piece. Staged in an alcove of the main hallway in the Centro Cultural Recoleta, the piece is ideally suited to its performance space. Miriam and Gaby are accessible to all interested passers-by without being intrusive, and audience members can easily pass toward and away from the performance.

The performance is cyclical, with no set beginning. Audience members discover Miriam and Gaby either engaged in tasks, or else lounging in the alcove or leaning against the back wall, across which are hung dingy white skirts, shirts, and vests. The performers dress in layers of white clothing, and cover their faces with white handkerchiefs. At the front of the alcove, a typewriter threaded with carbon paper sits on a podium next to a bell. A small, framed sign directs audience members:

ESCRIBA SU PREGUNTA AQUI
TOQUE TIMBRE
type your question here
ring bell for service

Strips of adhesive tape form a barrier between the performers and the audience. Another small podium, about six feet across the alcove, has a white post-it note with "YES | NO" written on it.

Whenever someone writes a question on the typewriter and rings the bell, Miriam feels her way across the alcove wall on her right, removes the paper, and examines the question, while Gaby rummages around at the back wall and produces a deck of playing cards. Gaby moves to the front of the space as Miriam walks behind her, and as Miriam begins an improvised choreography — sometimes just with a hand or foot, other times using her whole body — Gaby deals the cards, almost all of which are plain white, in tarot spreads. When she comes to one of the few cards with half-erased images, Gaby calls out, "Para!" and Miriam freezes. Gaby turns, examines Miriam's final position, and walks behind the

Gaby (seated) and Miriam Wolodarski wait for the next question in United Nations Dance Jeopardy.

second podium, where she writes an "answer."

Miriam joins Gaby at the front, and reads the original question aloud to the audience, at which point Gaby responds with her written answer (usually in Spanish, since while writing, Gaby has no way of gauging in which language the question was written). Finally, as Miriam leads the questioner over to the second podium, Gaby lifts up a white cardboard sign, on which, painted in black, is:

JUICIO
judgment

Miriam silently indicates for the audience member to signal his or her satisfaction with the answer to the question. Ringing a bell indicates "yes," and blowing into a little tin horn, "no." For "yes" answers, the Wolodarskis give a high-pitched, childish, "yay!", put on another piece of white clothing, and return to their previous lounging. For a "no," they let out a dejected sigh, snatch away the bell and horn, and remove one layer of clothing each before slinking back to the far wall.

The process continues countless times over the course of the evening, and it's intriguing each time. Because the piece is cyclical, Miriam and Gaby are constantly performing. As the evening wears on, another performance burst in when a woman wearing something between a hospital gown and a straightjacket crawls noisily through the corridor, dragging a spoon on the ground that she's secured between her teeth. As an interruption, it's blessedly brief, but as a cautionary counterpoint to Miriam and Gaby's piece, it's worth its weight in gold. *United Nations Dance Jeopardy* doesn't clamor for attention, but it manages to attract plenty of it. The nonchalance of the presentation allows audience members to discover the piece of their own accord, and the starkly beautiful arrangement of the space beckons to passers-by.

The white-on-cream-on-white alcove, covered in bits of paper and cloth, is a lure even without the Wolodarskis inside it. Over the course of the Encuentro, the alcove remains set up for the piece, with a long white paper sign labled *"Cerrado por autocensura"* (Closed for self-censorship), hung between the walls. The empty space attracts a huge number of visitors who type unanswered questions on the typewriter, at times leaving a trail of carbon paper sprawling across the alcove floor.

United Nations Dance Jeopardy allows for varying levels of time commitment. I was captivated for two hours, but other audience members watch for anywhere from 30 seconds to half an hour of the performance, and I think all of us witness a complete event. The alcove begins to feel like a portal to another universe with a different but complete set of logic, rather than a stage for a dance performance.

With the sisters' rich use of imagery and multiple levels of translation (typed question to dance to frozen image to written answer to audience member's auditory judgment), the performance embraces language while lovingly parodying its failings. The title of the performance is rendered into Spanish as *Peligro de Danza de las Naciones Unidas*, or Danger of the United Nations Dance, which misplaces any context of "Jeopardy!," the American television show. As Miriam points out, though, a piece about the absurdity of translation could ask for nothing better.

United Nations Dance Jeopardy eludes the trap of over-reliance on language, or of language as an exclusive means of exposition, that ensnares too many performances both within and outside of the Encuentro. But Miriam and Gaby don't eschew language: while they make fun of it, they put it to exquisite, sophisticated use. The "translation" in the piece is frequently beautiful, and oftentimes eerily prescient. Gaby's answers repeatedly provide a perfect counterpoint for audience members' questions, which — considering that she hasn't read the question and is only witness to the final pose of Miriam's rephrased dance — is as baffling as it is thrilling.

Dealing and dancing in United Nations Dance Jeopardy

I am originally scheduled to perform in the piece during the festival opening on June 8th, but a series of flight delays gets me to the first performance 30 minutes after it begins. Rushing in from the taxi, still adrenaline-buzzed from all of the hustling through airports, ready to throw on some white clothes and jump in if needed, I nervously type my question: "Is it too late?" Miriam steps back and executes a frantic dance with just her upper body, and

Gaby — still not having seen me — looks at her final pose and writes

no te hagas el martir
que te llenaron de belleza!

(don't make yourself a martyr
because they have filled you with beauty!)

The answer serves as a gracious welcome and as a reminder to shut up and enjoy the piece, which is proceeding perfectly well without me.

Watching again on June 17th, the performance strikes me as an ideal, meditative conclusion for ten days of nervous energy, over-stimulation, little sleep and caffeine-buzzed three-*alfajor* lunches. I am transfixed by Miriam's deceptively simple dances and the strangely accurate poetry of Gaby's answers. As I watch, famous performance artists, little kids, young couples, and groups of teenage girls trying hard to look appropriately cool and ironic pause at the border of the alcove, take the scene in, and type their questions. Almost all of them, having watched their "translation," ring the bell to signal "YES," and most walk away intently reading the slip of carbon paper with Gaby's answer.

Answering "YES," United Nations Dance Jeopardy

United Nations Dance Jeopardy reminds me most of Lois Weaver's Long Table, to which it seems to serve as the perfect counterpoint. In each, the rules for participation are clear, the possibilities for interaction are vast, and the borders between performer and audience member — perhaps the defining eternal conundrum of politically-engaged performance — are intriguingly blurry. The Long Table uses images in the service of language, while *United Nations Dance Jeopardy* uses language in the service of imagery. But both are examples of compelling contemporary performance, and both are cutting-edge without being edgy.

Both the Long Table and *United Nations Dance Jeopardy* serve as strong motivators. They are complex performances, but they spur further action from their participants without dictating the form or meaning of a response. Unlike performances that envision single, clear solutions, both — and *United Nations Dance Jeopardy* especially — are decidedly abstract. A little more than halfway through the June 17th closing performance, Catherine Killingsworth, a rising senior at Yale, types a question: "What have I been trying to say?" After an unusually long dance, during which Gaby spreads out almost the entire deck of cards, Miriam winds up in a graceful, curving backbend. Gaby considers and writes her answer, which she hands to Catherine. Written on the small square of yellow paper is simply the word, "Yes."

It's hard to pin a single conclusion on the Encuentro, but the images and answers of a mysterious "fun/funny" oracle seem to come closest. *United Nations Dance Jeopardy,* like much of the Encuentro's best work, generates trust and an explicit connection between performers and audience members, a leap of faith in the capabilities of bodies and the interaction between them. There is a sense that performers cannot only create representational responses to external politics, but also, through the creation of micro-communities within performances, suggest alternate realities and tactics. In his landmark book "Theatre of the Oppressed," the Brazilian director and theorist Augusto Boal writes that theatre should be "a rehearsal for the revolution." The performances at the Hemispheric Institute Encuentro are not so much preparation for a revolution as a series of small revolutions unto themselves, serving as markers of history as well as providing brief glimpses of a possible future. ❑

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