

2 NAHUATLAN THEATRE

We arrived at the Faculty of Arts of the Autonomous National University of Mexico (UNAM), seeking refuge for our research needs. Fortunately, we found an excellent old professor of ours: Oscar Zorrilla, who as well as knowing our anxieties in some depth, was also sympathetic to our quest.

Via the seminar which he was leading, we made contact with researchers such as Miguel León Portilla, Alfredo López Austin and Gabriel Weisz, who helped us in our studies and gave us a deeper understanding of Nahuatlán theatre/rite.³

For this brief analysis, we have taken as a base the broad study carried out by Professor Fernando Horcasitas, which was published by the National University with the title *Teatro Náhuatl* ([1974] 2004) (Nahuatlán Theatre). We shall also look at our field research into indigenous theatre/rite, undertaken in various parts of the Mexican mountains, as well as our contact with the pre-Hispanic conchero dance, and our own behind-closed-doors quests in our workshop.

Using these foundations as a starting point, we form our way of thinking which, in spite of any faults it may have, allows us to show the ways in which our work in the workshop has been nourished by these sources.

Does or did a Nahuatlán theatre exist? Since when and with what dramatic structure? In his excellent essay, Professor Horcasitas tells us that: ‘Our reply to this question will depend on our definition of the word “drama”’ (Horcasitas, [1974] 2004: 33). What is drama?

In the widest sense, the most rudimentary dialogue, or dance, or dialogued singing, can be termed drama. If we were to make a compilation of all the dramatic forms which have existed and which

3 Oscar Zorrilla (died 1985) was an academic renowned for his writings on Artaud. Miguel León Portilla is a Mexican anthropologist and historian, as is Alfredo López Austin. Gabriel Weisz is a Mexican theatre director and professor of theatre.

exist now, in all five continents, the variety would amaze us (Horcasitas, [1974] 2004: 34).

After giving various examples, he concludes: 'It is not unlikely that a form of theatre, in the widest sense of the term, has emerged in every culture, and the ancient Mexicans were no exception' (Horcasitas, [1974] 2004: 36).

Assuming the criterion of theatricality to be confirmed, what were the Nahuatl dramatic forms? Horcasitas replies:

According to León Portilla, the dramas and their texts can be divided into four categories:

1. The most ancient forms of performances in the Nahuatl religious festivals. For example, the author includes a hymn sung on the feast of Tláloc, performed by several characters, among whom are the god himself and the choir.
2. Several forms of comic acting and entertainment in the Nahuatl world. León Portilla copies the words of a jester who performs as various birds.
3. The staging of the great Nahuatl myths and legends, for instance there appears a dialogue sung about the flight of Quetzalcóatl from Tula.
4. Performances of subjects relating to problems in social and family life. The aforementioned investigator presents us with the text of a short but important comedy. Six voices are heard in the text: those of two 'gladdeners' or women of pleasure, that of the mother of one of them, those of two repentant 'gladdeners' and that of a young man called Ahuitzotl (Horcasitas, [1974] 2004: 48).

In this way, Miguel León Portilla confirms in Horcasitas' text the existence of four dramatic forms of Nahuatl theatre before the Spanish Conquest.

It must be noted that the Nahuatl language, as Horcasitas tells us, 'also known as Mexican or Aztec - is divided into three dialects: náhuatl, náhuat and náhuatl. Náhuatl is the language of the Mexican plateau' (Horcasitas,

[1974] 2004: 51), and its influence extends - or extended - from the north-west USA to Nicaragua.

With this reference framework, we can imagine the number of ritual, social or entertaining dramas which emerged in the Nahuatl language. Where are they now? Horcasitas points out: 'Whoever tries to have a general vision of indigenous theatre in the Mexican language, will soon realise that the dispersion of data and texts is frightening' (Horcasitas, [1974] 2004: 11). It seems that a great deal of material is still intermingled with chronicles in Nahuatl brought out by people like Sahagún and Durán⁴ in the Colony, as well as being found in various ancient codices awaiting the hand of a specialist to make a compilation. There have, however, been several advances made in this sense. Those interested can delve into the bibliographies of Angel María Garibay⁵, Miguel León Portilla or Alfredo López Austin, as a starting point.

Up to now, we can be quite sure of the deep and vast, ritualistic theatrical sense of Mexican people before the Spanish conquest; from the seriousness of the dramas in which somebody incarnated for forty days, living as a god and dying at the end of these celebrations, to the relaxation of certain dances, like the one which Durán mentions in Horcasitas' text:

With so many movements and face-pullings and dishonest pranks, which can easily be seen to be the dance of dishonest women and frivolous men. They called it *cuecuechcuicatl*, which means 'ticklish or itchy dance', and it features Indians dressed as women (Horcasitas, [1974] 2004: 41).

Without a shadow of doubt, an atmosphere of vivacious religious theatricality enveloped the pre-Hispanic world. In all these pre-Hispanic Nahuatl theatre forms, there is no documented register which would allow us to

4 Fray Bernardino Sahagún and Fray Diego de Durán were friars during the Conquest of Mexico who defended the Indians against colonisation. Sahagún and Durán recorded hundreds of folios of oral history materials in the Nahuatl language.

5 Angel María Garibay: scholar of Nahuatl; paleographer and translator.

rebuild fully the pre-Conquest Nahuatlán dramatic phenomenon. We know for certain that this phenomenon existed and exists today. On the one hand, the documentation is in impatient need of an expert's hand and, on the other, phenomena of Nahuatlán theatre/rite which have survived to the present day need to be restored and borne in mind as, in our opinion, is the case of the conchero dance; we shall explain why later on.

What happened to all this great theatrical rite activity which existed in pre-Hispanic Mexico, when the Spanish arrived? After the Conquest, says Horcasitas,

[T]here were remains of what had been a society of experts: singers, actors, dancers and jesters; poets and orators, voices trained for recital, memorising experts - as this did not depend on literacy. There were florists and scenery designers, specialist ceremonial dressmakers, craftsmen working with jewels, feathers and fabrics (Horcasitas, [1974] 2004: 82).

All these highly qualified people, on the one hand, and the missionaries' need to convert them to Christianity, on the other, as well as the high-point of religious theatre in Spain at the time of colonisation, stirred up in the minds of the Franciscans the possibility of cementing, through theatre in Nahuatlán, their evangelisation project. It was, in any case, an innovation, as evangelist theatre, Horcasitas tells us, 'had not been part of the missionaries' systems in the Old World', and he adds, 'the drama which existed in Europe in the Middle Ages was not intended to convert pagan tribes, but rather to strengthen the faith of people who had been Christians for many generations' (Horcasitas, [1974] 2004: 18). He also notes,

[I]n short, by 1524, many professionals connected with dramatic performances were idle, men who had received the acclaim of throngs in public places and had served the ruling class before the cataclysm, and now - in 1524 - the ruling class was the Franciscan order. It would have been very surprising if a theatre had not been born with the arrival of the missionaries (Horcasitas, [1974] 2004: 82).

Horcasitas then goes on to pinpoint the intention of the Franciscans:

the missionaries proposed, through theatre, to change the mentality of peoples who did not know the religion brought by the Europeans. They expected Mexican aborigines, through audio-visual methods, to abandon their age-old cultural and religious features, some of which dated back to Teotihuacan and Tula. Overnight the indigenous people, who twenty years earlier had adored Huitzilopóchtli and Tezcatlipoca, now had to learn about and believe in Adam and Eve, Abraham and Isaac, redemption, St. James' capture of Jerusalem, and so forth. By means of theatre, they also had to learn a new moral code and accept a whole series of new cultural features (Horcasitas, [1974] 2004: 56-57).

This is how a new Nahuatl-speaking theatre appeared in Mexico, the famous theatre of evangelisation, run by the Franciscans.

The first play of this type was staged in 1533. Entitled *The Final Judgement*, it caused a great sensation in its day and opened up a new age for theatre in Nahuatl, which lasted until about 1600.

The number and scale of these evangelist plays were abundant. Only in Professor Horcasitas' text can we find complete versions of thirty-five such plays.

Everything seems to indicate that the adventure of evangelist theatre came to an end due to the problems which the Franciscans had with the authorities of that period, who began to fear that on account of the popularity and strength which the Franciscans developed from 1533 to 1570, they might have been thinking of setting up as a state. These fears emerged because it was clear that the Franciscans were in a privileged position, as they were able to assimilate the ritual structure of the indigenous peoples and promote an exceptional unification with Christianity.

The period of Nahuatl theatre with a western dramatic structure, known as evangelisation theatre, therefore lasted, essentially, from 1533 to about 1600.

The pre-Hispanic dramatic structures were sifted with the western ones brought by the Franciscans, so what then happened to Nahuatl theatre?

It seems that the structure conceived and developed by the Franciscans dissolved slowly from 1600 onwards, although in some parts it has survived to this day.

Experts tell us that it is in *pastorale*, by this time in Spanish, where there are the most reminders of Nahuatlán evangelist theatre.

The *pastorale* is a dramatic phenomenon which has survived in some parts of Mexico and is performed specifically in the week leading up to Christmas Eve. Its theme is always that of the birth of the infant Jesus and the adoration of the Three Kings.

Apart from the *pastorale*, we believe there are various phenomena of theatrical rite which were not essentially affected by the Spanish Conquest, since their capacity for unification allowed them to survive as transcultural phenomena awaiting their renewal. Their transcultural condition, in other words the fact that they are not purely indigenous - or purely western - is what gives them mobility and the chance to grow. We are well aware that pure cultures do not exist, that all civilisations have been forged in the pot of crossbreeding. In reference to the crossbreeding of Nahuatlán theatre, Horcasitas tells us:

It would therefore be wrong to state that drama in Nahuatlán is not indigenous because it deals with matters about which Mexicans knew nothing in the pre-Hispanic period. In that case, we would have to deny the authenticity of the village *talavera*, the hat woven from palm leaves, tequila, mariachis and shawls, as they did not exist in Mexico before the Spanish arrived. Aztec civilisation itself was impregnated with elements from other cultures. The worship of the jaguar came from the tropical region of the south-east, metallurgy probably from the Guerrero-Oaxaca region, polychromatic ceramics from the Puebla-Mixteca area, the Tlazoltéotl cult from Huasteca (Horcasitas, [1974] 2004: 61).

In contemporary Mexican culture it is difficult to define precisely what is indigenous and what is western; a new vision of the world has developed

through our crossbreeding, transformed into a country, and this does not exclude our pre-Hispanic phenomena which have survived to the present day.

We have already spoken of the importance of the Nahuatl language in Central America. This importance was well evaluated by the missionaries, proof of this being the fact that the first book to be printed on the American continent, the *Breve y más compendiosa doctrina cristiana en lengua mexicana y castellana* (Brief and most condensed Christian doctrine in Mexican and Spanish), published in Mexico in 1539, was in Nahuatl and Spanish.⁶

An interesting fact about Nahuatl theatre, promoted by the Franciscans, is that it was presumably the first theatre to be written in prose. Horcasitas says: 'In the western world, since the Greeks and the Romans, writing theatre was synonymous with writing in verse' (Horcasitas, [1974] 2004: 81). If this continued in the west until after the Spanish Golden Age, we realise that, as Horcasitas points out: 'Theatre in the Mexican tongue was probably the first to be conceived and written entirely in prose' (Horcasitas, [1974] 2004: 81).

Another question is: what type of actors performed this Nahuatl evangelisation theatre?

Here, the Franciscans were successful from the very beginning, as they made indigenous people work as actors. The latter's ability to memorise and understand the dramatic sense of the situation was in their blood. Motolinia⁷ comments that such was their aptitude that in two days they learned and performed four sacred acts. Horcasitas says of this: 'We can deduce that the actor-singers in the performances were not amateurish young novices, but mature men with excellent training and experience in the rites, chants and ways of the Franciscan order' (Horcasitas, [1974] 2004: 173). We discovered that Philip II, in the second half of the 16th century, decreed that women should not be allowed to act in theatre. Hence in this evangelist theatre all

6 This text is available today only in its original form in the Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City.

7 Motolinia: like Sahagun and Duran, a Franciscan friar and observer of Indian life.

women's roles, such as that of the Virgin Mary, were performed by men. This prohibition was redeemed by Innocent XI a hundred years later.

The fact that women's roles were played by men was not so extraordinary for the indigenous people. They were used to this type of transfer, and the seriousness with which the roles were surely played is confirmed by Horcasitas:

This psychological condition dates back to the period before Columbus. In pre-Conquest theatre, as we have seen, the characters were so possessive of their roles that not only did they believe they were gods, but the faithful also looked upon them as divine. This identification of the actor with his role seems to have survived strongly through the colonial period. A traveller from the beginning of the 17th century talks of the beliefs of the Chiapas Indians with regard to theatrical performances: it was common for the actor who was going to play St. Peter or John the Baptist to hear confessions first, where people would say that they had to be saintly and pure like the saint they were playing, and equally prepared to die. In the same way, the actor who was playing Herod or Herodias, or one of the soldiers who had to accuse the saints during the scene, went afterwards to confess his sin and ask for pardon, as if he had been guilty of spilling blood (Horcasitas, [1974] 2004: 96).

It would be interesting to discover the exact training procedures for pre-Hispanic actors, although we can guess that most, if not all, of this training was carried out in the Calmecac [Aztec school of religious instruction].

The stages in pre-Hispanic Nahuatl theatre were basically *mamoztli*.⁸ We do not mean that all platforms of this type were strictly stages; they would presumably have other uses unknown to us. Horcasitas tells us that these platforms have the following common features:

- 1) it is stone; 2) it is square; 3) it has one, two or four staircases at the sides; 4) it is isolated, not supported by the building; 5) the building is always of the utmost importance; 6) the height of the platform is

⁸ *Mamoztli*: stone platforms erected opposite pyramids and used for certain celebrations.

little more than the height of a man; 7) its surface varies in size from four hundred to twenty-five square metres; 8) it does not appear to have had a permanent building placed over the top, since its plastered floor, in the cases in which it has survived, seems to be flat (Horcasitas, 1974/2004: 115).

Horcasitas adds:

Not only were there performances on the platforms I have described, but also during ball games (reference: León Portilla), in the courtyards of palaces (Garibay), in artificial forests (Durán), in markets (León Portilla) and even in the *temalacatl*, or the stone area of gladiatorial sacrifice (Sahagún) (Horcasitas, [1974] 2004: 104).

Performances of colonial Nahuatl theatre took place in church porches, in pavilions propped up against the walls of churches, or on small wooden platforms built specifically for the occasion.

A typical feature of Nahuatl theatre is the presence of nature in its plays: trees, fruit, live and dead animals, flowers, feathers, golden and natural birds; all this scenario decked with nature could, we believe, be a type of giant offering in the form of stage decoration. The lavishness of the performances is described in detail by, among others, the chroniclers Sahagún and Durán, and there is no doubt that it represents an inheritance of Nahuatl theatrical rite which has survived to this day.

There are sixteen musical instruments used in Nahuatl evangelisation theatre, according to Professor Horcasitas' diligent investigation: eleven woodwind instruments, only three from the string family, the drum and the bells. Musicologists seeking a more detailed description of these instruments should consult Professor Horcasitas' text *Teatro Nahuatl* [Nahuatl Theatre] ([1974] 2004).

However, in this list of instruments, no mention has been made of one which has discreetly coloured all manner of performance and dance up to the present day, as well as being, we believe, one of the most important: the snail shell.

This organic structure, perhaps due to its isolated elocutions and its purely animal origin, has not been thought of as a musical instrument; yet, given its vibratory quality, it is one of the most important for raising energy. Just like the Tibetan trumpets, the Central American snail shell is an effective instrument to assist in the updating of the consciousness.

In our workshop we have carried out some explorations in this sense, and we have verified the significance of its vibratory quality, due to the fact that its organic spiral structure reflects the rhythm of the cosmos in a synthetic way. When it is made to vibrate with appropriate mental polarisation, contact with deep scales of energy is almost immediate. With good reason the snail shell is looked upon as a sacred instrument, both in Central America and in Tibet.

Our first contacts with festivities of Nahuatl theatre/rite were in the atmosphere, and formed part, of the reality in which we were living. This has surely been the case with many Mexicans, who without looking for it - even less wishing to study it - have discovered themselves at birth, submerged in an atmosphere of celebrations and festivities which conserve much of their pre-Hispanic origin.

Although these first contacts have not been diligently registered, as research work demands, they nevertheless left a deep impression on us. In my case, I began to feel these impacts when I was five years old. On the ranch of Chimalpa in the State of Hidalgo, where I was born, we celebrated the patron saint's day. The peasants and pulque cultivators would ask for permission to use both the church and the internal courtyard or the interior passageways of the ranch, to celebrate their performance, *The Life of the Glorious Apostle St. James*. So the spaces for our everyday games were transformed as my brothers and sisters and I looked on in awe, into a coming and going of men dressed in loud colours, who burned resin, wore masks and feathers and shouted, danced and drank with gusto. As part of the dance they crossed the blades of their machetes with such intensity that sparks flew up at every strike. There was, nevertheless, a sense of deep security; these men, for all their ferocity, and with the volcanoes - Popocatepetl and Iztaccíhuatl - at the bottom of the garden, were praying to

God. I never felt afraid. The parts of the dances I still remember are the skips and jumps which seemed like explosions of colours, sounds, smells and emotions. They appeared to me to be living offerings of their own energy. Several times, I do not know exactly how many, we experienced this festival of Nahuatlan theatre, spoken in Spanish but dotted with odd phrases in Nahuatlan, which inadvertently came violently into my house.

The fact that the ranch was close to Tlaxcala explains the power this festival always had, bearing in mind that Tlaxcala was one of the most important centres of Nahuatlan theatre.

In later years, we have been to various indigenous performances in different parts of the Republic, sometimes as guests of people such as Rodolfo Valencia,⁹ that great figure of indigenous theatre, and other times, pursuing our own research.

This type of dramatised festivity, or theatrical rite, survives in almost all the Central American ethnic groups. In some places it is dotted with Spanish, with the sung voice in Nahuatlan; in other areas, it is the other way round. The performances or celebrations are mobile, and hence not easy to locate. It could be said, as anthropologists confirm, that these ethnic groups, with their rites and celebrations, are tending to die out in a relatively short space of time.

Paradoxically, as recently as 1985, we watched in Mexico City a play directed by Andrés Segura, who is said to be one of the inheritors of Mexican indigenous tradition. This play told the myth of the Sixth Sun with a strictly western dramatic structure. The stage was designed in an Italian style and the play, was, of course, in Spanish with some words in Nahuatlan. There was no sign of the open spaces or the lavish presence of nature, which always characterised pre-Hispanic theatre. This work could be considered an authentic piece of contemporary Nahuatlan theatre. We believe that it

⁹ Rodolfo Valencia was a Mexican theatre practitioner whose Teatro Campesino worked in rural and indigenous communities in Mexico.

is possible that this group, if they work on their theatrical tool and polish it, could be a huge success on the stage. Nevertheless, they could lose a lot, if not all, of the theatre's ritual, festive sense.

The excellent voice and speech-style of Juan Allende vibrated out, in Nahuatlán, the *Plan of Ayala* (the version authorised by Professor Miguel León Portilla for this work), while Helena Guardia translated it simultaneously into Spanish. As far as we know, this was the first time that a speech in Nahuatlán had been heard in Mexican university theatre.

The phenomenon of a recovery of Nahuatlán values through contemporary theatre is growing stronger by the day, essentially in Mexico City. Here, the important thing is that those of us who are working on this recovery should realise that we must be prepared to investigate the most suitable dramatic options for our intentions; there is no reason why we should stick to the structures of a western theatre which could make our content rigid, when the area and time are right to look into theatrical alternatives which allow us to define and mature our own spiritual and cultural concerns. In our workshop, we have been advancing in this sense for more than ten years, developing what we have termed designs for participatory theatre.

Our experience with pastorales, considered the very essence of Nahuatlán theatre, lies in, on the one hand, our role as spectators at a good number of them, and on the other, in our collaboration in directing a few. We had the chance to learn in depth the ins and outs of what is involved in performing a pastorela these days, for instance the one performed at Tepozotlán, possibly the most famous one performed in Mexico at the moment. The spectacular effect of the pastorela lies in the use of part of the convent of Tepozotlán as a stage, its large production, and the completeness of the party when the performance is over: fireworks, jars of sweets, food, drink, mariachis and so on. Without doubt, we could expand on each of these points, as we are fully aware of the richness of theatrical festivity which this pastorela contains, having directed it in 1975.

Elsewhere, the contact we have with a type of Nahuatlán theatre which is still alive, like the conchero dance, has been quite helpful in the development

of our schemes for participatory theatre. We were introduced to the conchero dance through people like Gonzalo Alvarado and Armando Alvarez, the latter being a member of our beloved General Teresa's group.¹⁰

The conchero dance was, and is, an instrument of pre-Hispanic religion. Horcasitas says of pre-Hispanic dance in general:

Dance was part of the ancient religion, it was still very popular in the period of vicereignty, and even today it has not died out as a religious demonstration in fiestas. It would have been logical for the missionaries to use it for their missionary theatre, but they did not (Horcasitas, [1974] 2004: 158).

It is clear that the missionaries could not find a way to use the code of the dances to convert people. Nevertheless, as it was a prehispanic religious dance, in order to survive it had to take in images and effects of Catholic orthodoxy, thus creating a religious union which is difficult to define.

In present-day gatherings to perform this dance, Christian and pre-Hispanic elements can be seen to harmonise splendidly, intermingling to such an extent that it has so far been useless, and we would even dare to say hurtful, to attempt a 'purist' recovery. All religions are fusions, amalgamations, melting pots. The phenomenon of union in pre-Hispanic shell conchero dances is a true reflection of how the aspirations of authentic Christianity and pre-Hispanic religion are blended in a single impulse to dance for God. This phenomenon, with this unified structure, is what the Mexicans of today are living through. In this structure we can find Nahuatl theatrical rite totally alive, together with images and guidelines of Christianity brought to life by this dance. We believe it is a religious phenomenon corresponding to contemporary Mexicans, that is to say racially mixed people. Through this phenomenon it is possible for us to blend and reach a deep understanding of our two basic religious sources, the pre-Hispanic and the Christian one.

¹⁰ General Teresa is the captain, leader and guide of a conchero group researching and performing ritual dance, working within the Mesa del Santo Niño de Atocha.

Nowadays, contacts are on the increase; cultures and religions are interacting more than ever; the opening up of opinion makes us appreciate on the one hand the humanism and teachings which are so magnificently developed in Nahuatlan philosophy and religion, and on the other hand, their absolute convergence with authentic Christianity. We feel that a contemporary Mexican must try to gain a deeper knowledge of these two sources in order to open himself up to his own evolution.

Returning to the theme of dance, Professor Horcasitas tells us that, 'in fact, on reading the chronicles of the colonial period, it becomes obvious that pre-Christian dance outlived the Conquest' (Horcasitas, [1974] 2004: 156). It can clearly be understood that, since dance was religion in motion, pre-Christian religion outlived the Conquest and instead of adopting a shy attitude towards the conquistador, assimilated Christian values and images into its structure.

At this point we shall leave these matters. We would point out that our commentary on Nahuatlan theatre is brief and schematic. Anybody interested in looking into the area in greater depth would be advised to consult Professor Horcasitas' excellent study *Teatro Nahuatl* ([1974] 2004), the essential source of our quotations. We would also mention that the importance of Professor Horcasitas' text spurred us to try and act as a bridge for the furthering of his work.

We shall now turn our attention to the importance to our workshop of the conchero dance, which is of interest to us from a strictly scientific angle: on the one hand, its great capacity as an instrument for updating the consciousness, and on the other, the help it offers us in working out significant parts of our designs for participatory theatre.

In its internal structure we have discovered:

1. It is a dance - or meditation in motion - performed through a defined body alphabet, a type of mandala in motion, which charges the performer with energy.

2. The performer, allegorically, is a warrior fighting his battle through the dance, to achieve individual and group freedom. The dance is performed in a circle.
3. This battle is essentially internal. The performer is striving to maintain the level of attention in the 'here and now', by offering energy to the essences, with energetic resonance in the external world.

These three points of contact, the reader will remember, are exactly the same as we have shown for the Tibetan 'Black Hat' dance.

It disturbs us that two theatrical rite dances, so far apart from each other, should essentially unite the same intentions. Might it be due to coincidence, as we have mentioned, or to a common ancestral source for the two cultures? The experts are the ones to discover these unknown factors; we simply set out the evidence.

In conclusion, we can say that the conchero dance could possibly be looked upon as the most significant phenomenon and the most convincing proof of the continuity of a type of Nahuatlán theatrical rite which is very likely to survive into the future and play a significant role in Mexican culture.

In addition to the conchero dance, we have also had the chance, up in the Mexican mountains, to come into contact with certain indigenous ceremonies which have given us an insight into another living aspect of the strong pre-Hispanic culture.

These ceremonies are isolated and difficult to get to; distances and discomforts must be overcome, and one has to be lucky enough to arrive at the right time, as it is never known exactly when the celebrations will be held, except in Holy Week, on All Souls' Day, or another day when it is known beforehand more or less when and where they are due to take place. This uncertainty is due to the movable nature of these feasts.

We travelled, during our period of research, to various parts of the mountains in Nayarit, Puebla, Oaxaca, and the Yucatán Peninsula, as well as to certain areas in the centre of the Republic. In our search for ritual sources

in Mexico, we invariably found the voice as an instrument of induction and a guide to achieving deep states of consciousness; the quality of the voice's vibration, as used by *mara'akames*, shamans, or pre-Hispanic priests, always has a litany, or a chant structure, designed to summon up energies for different purposes: to cure, celebrate, marry people, punish, give thanks, or help the dying to pass away with dignity and correctness.

Of all these celebrations, perhaps the most suitable to talk about here was the one we attended in San Andrés Coamiata, in the Huicholan mountains.

There, in December one year, in the celebrations for the change of governor, we attended the sacrifice of a bull, which had its throat slit so as to feed the Sun with its blood. The blood fell into a pit which was mythically connected to the centre of the Earth. In this sacred pit, people dipped their fingers respectfully and made the sign of the cross on their foreheads. The first to do this were the local dignitaries, and then gradually all those present went on to splash a bloody blessing onto relatives - present or absent, alive or dead - property, cattle, business possibilities etc. Afterwards they moved on to the communion with the meat of this bull, which was ritually cut up there and then shared out among the congregation, who numbered about three hundred in total. The performance's archaic sense sent shivers down the spine. After the communion with the meat, a pilgrimage was begun which ended by the temple door, in a rectangular space of about twenty metres deep by seven wide, completely empty apart from a cross, erected a few metres from the back, on which there could clearly be seen the drawing of the 'eye of God', or the Huicholan cross - yet another fact suggesting an exceptional sense of unification. Here people made offerings, lit candles, and left *mauvieris* (little arrows with their tiny bow, which are 'charged' with the wish of the offerer). The action is accompanied throughout by violins, little bells and little drums which emphasise the continual sung prayer. At nightfall, the people get together in various houses around the fire, which is in the middle of the room, to eat and drink *tehuino*, a drink which contains peyote. Sprigs of peyote were offered up by the people in charge who - according to their

judgement - offered them to some people and not to others. The main aim of the meeting is to keep the chant alive, which helps them to get through the night and steer clear of all the *chamucos* (demons) released by the darkness.

The imposing austerity of the mountains, protected by a sky full of stars, and the murmur of human warmth giving itself over to the energies of the light, instilled in us a deep sense of brotherhood. There we were, high up in the mountains, gathered in small groups around a fire, provoking a rather extraordinary flow of communicating vessels; seeing and hearing the reflections of our minds. Looking at the spectacle from outside, it seemed like a group which was too exposed, vulnerable, extremely fragile and delicate, and at the same time blessed with unique strength and beauty, like the orchid.

The clarity of dawn slowly uncovered the other reality, the everyday one. Shapes regained their volume and colour, and certainty tentatively built its path back to reason, to common sense. Nevertheless, in our stomachs, there was still a feeling which linked us to emptiness.

As we received the sunrise with songs and offerings, the rhythm and the rite of this interpenetrant fullness and emptiness became clear to us, audibly and visually.

It is a well-known fact that the Huicholans are among the Mexican ethnic groups who most rigorously uphold their traditions. They may well be among the most highly-charged in this sense.

We should make it clear that the appreciation we have set out here is barely the subjective and fragmented vision of an outsider, for we are a long way from finding the internal code of these ceremonies, despite having studied them and even having been lucky enough to share with these people the pilgrimage to Viricota, where we took part and shared in the sublime, luminous flight in the hunt for peyote.

We could also mention how lucky we were to share, up in the Mazatecan mountains, in a ceremony performed by Apolonia, the daughter and heiress of

María Sabina,¹¹ who by the end of her life was deeply saddened and lamented the publicity prostitution which belittled the strength of the child saints, one of the most striking and revealing rites of pre-Hispanic religion.

So as not to cast our net too widely, we shall simply underline the fact that in this ceremony, as in most of those in which we took part in Mexico, the vibration of the voice synchronised with the mental intention of the performer is, we believe, one of the main tools used; this is not to detract from the musical, odorous and alimentary elements which characterise all these ceremonies.

In our research, we place particular emphasis on vibration since, as is scientifically proven, the solidity of matter does not exist, and in the universe the only things which move are impulses of energy susceptible to change direction, size, intensity and colour, according to their vibration quality. This is why vibration seems to us to be the most suitable reference framework for the cultural proposal and design of mechanisms which speed up and purify our vibration; cultural designs which help us to shake off the sick vision of a staticised universe. We could mention here that quantum theory and contemporary psychology - as we understand them - have helped us to form a much fuller vision of our work in the theatre.

The reader may be wondering why theatrical people should be interested in ceremonies, vibration, psychology and quantum theory.

Investigation is an inherent human impulse. Through investigation we discovered that theatre was breaking down its frontiers. One of our first steps was to study our own body, spirit and origin. Octavio Paz's *El Laberinto de la Soledad* (1950) (*The Labyrinth of Solitude*, 1961) was our starting point for beginning to discover our identity. The stage version of this text was called *Laberinto* (Labyrinth). There it was revealed to us not only that a philosophical essay can be turned into a theatrical performance, but also that it is possible for

11 María Sabina was a Mazatec *curandera* (or shaman), brought to international attention in Gordon Wasson's *Maria Sabina and Her Mazatec Mushroom Velada* (1976).

us to delve deeper into our roots. The research and performance of *Laberinto* was authorised by Professor Octavio Paz, who was pleased to see in dramatic images and situations what he had constructed in his words.

The impulse to work through theatre, and the study of ourselves gave us access to Nahuatlan philosophy, pre-Hispanic theatre, ceremonies in Mexico, Turkey, Poland and India, quantum thought and its resonances in contemporary culture. It led us to experience western theatrical trends close-up, like in the Old Vic in England, the Actor's Studio in New York and the Laboratory Theatre in Poland. It also led us to research into Tibetan theatre at the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts in India. But, essentially, it led us to develop tools for participatory theatre as an alternative option for contemporary theatre. These are designs in which certain tools and the vital impulse of Nahuatlan philosophical thought still survive.