

CASE STUDY: THE FLIGHT OF QUETZALCOATL –
TEOTIHUACAN, MEXICO (2000)

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In 2000, the *Taller* performed a major work at Teotihuacan, the pyramid site near Mexico City. *The Flight of Quetzalcoatl* was a durational work in two senses: it crossed the night, beginning at dusk and ending at dawn the next morning, and it was performed on every full moon for the entire year.

The production focused on the archetype of the sun, as symbolised in the Pyramid of the Sun, and articulated in the myths of Quetzalcóatl, a solar deity, and in the story of Nanahuatzin (see p. 233 above), two figures closely associated with Teotihuacan. The mythic trope of going into, and through, darkness in order to come into light underpinned the whole project and informed the ritual structure of the audience experience. In September 2000, I was part of a group who undertook a two-week workshop residency with Núñez and his then assistant, Nad'xeli Forcada, at the *Taller's* base just outside the Teotihuacan archaeological zone. The residency culminated in our participation in *The Flight of Quetzalcoatl* along with other audience members who had travelled out from Mexico City. The following account draws on a description of the experience that was published in *Total Theatre* in 2001 (Middleton: 2000/2001).

The Flight of Quetzalcoatl was structured into three sections, divided by two breaks in which refreshments were available at the *Taller's* base - a rustic building close to the periphery of the pyramid site. Outside the building there was a painted *tonalamatl* platform - a circular stage on which the Nahuatl calendar had been painted. It was on this platform that the performance began and ended.

Our first action is the choosing of a small card which, when turned over, reveals one of the Nahuatl zodiac signs, and determines where we will each stand when we climb onto the painted platform. There is a frisson of

excitement, a little nervousness as spectators who have arrived together are separated. I watch my friends smile as they turn their cards over, and discover which symbol they have unwittingly chosen. I receive Ehecatl – the Wind.

On the *tonalamatl* platform we stand on a symbolic Universe, part of a cosmic order, not the social order. The *tonalamatl* symbol is also the first and most personal piece of information we receive. Each participant can make a personal reflection on the performance from the starting point of their *tonalamatl* sign (Middleton, 2000/01: 21).

From this opening, we are taken, single-file and in silence, on an eight-mile walk around the periphery of the pyramid site. We go clockwise, with the pyramids on our right, huge against the night sky. The monitors wear *ayoyotes* so that their walking creates a rhythm to which our own rhythm can entrain. 'It is a kind of walking meditation, in which the vision of the pyramids flows beside us and through us' (Middleton, 2000/01: 21). When the silent circumambulation is complete, we walk out into the scrubby landscape, and find there a campfire, tended by a solitary actor. We sit with him and he tells the story of Nanahuatzin. The audience listens – quiet and reflective after the meditative effects of the walking.

The second section of the event 'comprises the transformative crux of the work' (Middleton, 2000/01: 21). After a short break, back at base camp, we are blindfolded and led away from the base in a disorientating process which confounds any sense of direction or location. The landscape around Teotihuacan is fairly flat - a large plateau ringed by mountains - so it is with great surprise that I sense a change in the quality of the air and the ambient sounds and realize that we are being led, one by one, into caves. When the whole audience has been seated on the rough ground of the cave, the second performed sequence begins; the story of Quetzalcóatl, the feathered serpent, is told chorally, delivered in darkness against the cave's strange acoustics. It is a story forged on the mythic template of the descent into darkness and the ascent, phoenix-like, into light. We are invited to contemplate the archetype

of the feathered serpent, which, as Núñez wrote in the production dossier, ‘all of us carry within ourselves’ (Núñez, 2000a, *n.p.*).

When at last we are invited to remove our blindfolds, we find ourselves in a deep, total blackness. For a time we undergo the sensory deprivation of silence and sightlessness... Finally, candles are lit and we find ourselves in a large cavern seated around a huge display of flowers, blooming weirdly there at the dark centre of the earth (Middleton, 2000/01: 21).

We are blindfolded again for the return to the surface, where we are each laid gently on the open ground. At a signal, we open our eyes to the night sky filled with stars. The entrance to the caves is nowhere in sight; the mystery remains.

The final section of *The Flight of Quetzalcoatl* is, ritually, the phase of reincorporation. Here we are invited to consolidate and manifest what the experiences of the night have offered: like Nanahuatzin, we are given the opportunity to ‘jump into the fire’; like Queztlacoatl, we are invited to ‘be the heroes of our own adventure. With a small effort, we can really make our heart fly’ (Núñez, 2000b).

The jump - the flight - is, of course, symbolic, but it is also embodied; to return to the *tonalamatl* platform from which the performance began, we must each jump through a hoop of flaming candles.

As we prepare to ‘jump’ we look through the flaming circle and see the sun beginning to rise behind the pyramid of the sun. On the platform, one by one, we join the traditional pre-Hispanic Dance of Quetzalcoatl. Following the dance steps, feeling the rhythms, moving cyclically together we bring the night to an end. The sun comes up. The darkness has passed (Middleton, 2000/01: 21).

Although *The Flight of Quetzalcoatl* is unusual in the *Taller’s* history in terms of its durational aspects, it is exemplary in terms of its use of participatory devices and structures, and in its challenge to audiences. In *The Flight*, Núñez

had full scope to develop and express his notion of a 'high-risk theatre'. In fact, the chapter of that name below (first published in a book of the same name in 2007), was partially developed from essays Núñez wrote for the production dossier for *The Flight of Quetzalcoatl*.

The theatre critic Fernando de Ita has suggested that Núñez's audience is 'a group of individuals who do not want to go to the theater, but to live an extraordinary experience' (Núñez, 2007: 46). In fact, what the *Taller's* participatory productions offer is theatre *as* extraordinary experience; and there is, perhaps, no better example of this than *The Flight of Quetzalcoatl*.

REFERENCES

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