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Beatriz Pizano: The Politics of Caring

By: Pamela Snell

“If politics is about caring about what happens in our world, then I guess I am political, I would never define myself in those terms but, if it is about what happens to another human being, then I do care.” - Beatriz Pizano

Given the theme for this issue of Women in Theatre is women, politics, and theatre, I thought an interview with Beatriz Pizano would be a fantastic addition. I was lucky enough to speak with her to discuss her journey as an actress, playwright, director and human rights activist.

When Pizano came to Toronto to pursue an acting career, she was surprised to discover that the theatre community didn’t know what to do with a Colombian-Canadian woman who had an accent.

She was told: “We just don’t know how to justify you in a script.”

Pizano was disappointed by the lack of cultural diversity on the city’s theatre stages and decided to create a one women show that would showcase her talent. While that piece was in development, an opportunity to return to Colombia arose and she spent three months working as an interpreter for a documentary film that was following the work of Peace Brigades International. This experience would change the direction of her artistic career.

While in Colombia, Beatriz was awakened to a side of her country that she hadn’t previously known. She travelled through the war zone wrought with civil war with a counterfeit media pass and worked as an interpreter; she was faced with violence and death on a daily basis. She met and was inspired by female human rights activists, prompting her to return to Canada and devote the content of her one-woman to their stories. Her interest in women and war led to a trilogy of plays, all set in the political context of Colombia. Through the stories of women and female child soldiers, the plays, For Sale, Madre, La Comunion, explore death and memory.

The trilogy would later launch Aluna Theatre, a company that attempts to shift the scales of imbalance by bringing social justice, equality and human rights to the forefront of all of their productions.

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Though the trilogy is about Colombia, for Pizano, it was important to try to connect the plays geographically, to Canada. It is her belief that Canadian society has an overwhelming lack of information, that “we sit comfortably thinking that it is only those countries down there that have problems.” So, she wanted to explore Canada’s involvement in these wars – Canadian mining, for instance, contributed indirectly to producing and sustaining social and economic inequalities - and to raise awareness in Canada, where Pizano believes “information is well kept from us,” and human rights abuses are happening “right under our noses.”

Through her work, Pizano has brought over thirty Canadian actors to work in Colombia. It is her belief that these artistic exchanges are very important in building awareness and a critical consciousness.

Upon completion of her trilogy, Pizano grew interested in a play by one of Aluna Theatre’s board members, Catherine Frid. Based on the events involving the Toronto 18, Home Grown explores the relationship between a lawyer/playwright and a prisoner accused of terrorism. The play attempts to distinguish truth from government propaganda. When Frid first started talking about it, Pizano “couldn’t believe it, I couldn’t believe that [this] was happening here, that this country that has been known for so long as protectors of human rights was committing these incredible [acts], against international law, [holding] people in solitary confinement for over a year. That is against international law.”

Pizano decided that this was a story that had to be told and took on the role of director.

For Pizano, this play was type that one wanted to produce quickly; it didn’t need four star reviews, it was about sharing information. Unfortunately, when the company began the production, they were met with resistance. Frid was sent horrible emails full of accusations and threats. Pizano believes that people needed an excuse to devalue the play and attacking Frid was one way: “If a man had written the play it would have been different, none of these personal accusations [would have happened].”

The controversy surrounding the play eventually led Prime Minister Stephen Harper tp speak out against the company. Pizano thought it absurd that the Prime Minister was chastising a small theatre company such as hers. Subsequently, the Heritage Minister cancelled funding the Summerworks Festival in 2011, because they had included the play in their programming, and many believe this was to prevent the play from being seen.

Pizano agrees that the play does not tell the story of an innocent man, but asks, was he a terrorist? What was the role of CSIS? What was fabricated by the authorities? There were many questions left unanswered and the production of the play seemed to be leading to more questions, complexities and conspiracies.

The experience of Home Grown made Pizano realize just how vulnerable individuals can become in the War against Terror. She went to visit Shareef in prison to prepare herself for

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directing. Frid warned that a file would be opened on her, Pizano responded, “if they wanted to create a fantasy around my life they could, if they wanted to cause me trouble, and deny me entry, they could…I never go through the [United] States if I don’t have to… they decide who is a terrorist without you even knowing that you are being labeled as one.” Here in Canada, we aren’t accustomed to seeing our government blatantly exercise their power in this way, because they keep it hidden. Beatriz believes that with theatre we can raise awareness about these human rights issues. In her view, Canada is dealing with all sorts of human rights abuses such as racism and poverty, but, “we just don’t see it because the rest of the system works so well.” Therefore, “there are some plays that are for the stage, and others that are for raising awareness.” Home Grown was for raising awareness.

When Pizano began Aluna Theatre she wanted to promote the work of women and Latin American artists. Since then the politics of the work has changed a lot, and there is a lot more talk about intercultural theatre, but the focus of the company has stayed the same.

**Pizano on Political Theatre:**
“We get very afraid of terminologies here, if we say political theatre, people say, oh that’s boring, if you see our work, it is not that, we are incredibly experimental in our form, we are not didactic, and that’s the kind of theatre that we are interested in, that type of theatre that deals with human rights, ... for us the art comes first, the art is always about pushing ourselves as artists, what new language can we investigate, what defies our theatrical language as a company, ... we always talk about human rights, ... we are committed to social issues and that is what excites me.”

**Pizano on Politics:**
“I don’t necessarily like the word political, but I want to make them think, there are amazing pieces of work out there that make them think.”

Her next work: **Architecture of Terrorism** is set for production in 2013

For more information: [www.alunatheatre.ca](http://www.alunatheatre.ca)