

From the Adventures of Chuchupe and the Theatre of the Oppressed

Report by Ricardo Galvez

Oppression as a form of relationship between human beings is expressed in multiple forms, levels, and areas, separating us into groups of oppressors and oppressed. Augusto Boal stated that we are all, in some facet of our social life, oppressors and oppressed. However, in countries like Peru, the oppressed groups tend to be the same in different areas of social life.

From there, it is better understood that the street comedians participating in the creative process of *Las Aventuras de Chuchupe* (hereinafter *Chuchupe*), despite their geographical and cultural distance from the topic of mining in Madre de Dios, have achieved a certain level of identification with the oppressed groups in the story (the informal and artisanal miners, in particular, the workers or community members).

The Theatre of the Oppressed seeks to empower oppressed groups through the resources of the arts (imagination, body, voice, collective creation, expression, etc.) to understand their reality and strengthen themselves in their fight to end the oppressions that affect them. The political principle of the TO is to be a theatre of the oppressed, for them, the oppressed, and done by them, the oppressed. In that sense, it is a fundamental premise of Boal's proposal that each oppressed group works with its own collective oppressions, not with the oppressions of others.

This principle disagrees with the experience of *Chuchupe*, in which Cómicos Ambulantes (Street Comedians) from Lima approach, through collective stage creation, the oppressions and realities of compatriots from another region of Peru (Madre de Dios) and from another cultural, social, and labour reality.

Is it possible to make a TO with the oppressions of others?

To answer this question, it should first be noted that Chuchupe did not, at any time, seek to produce a process and a piece of forum theatre from the logic of TO. In fact, the uncertainty about the format or product resulting from a process of inquiry, typical of a contemporary art project, is opposed to the logic of theatrical production from the aesthetics of TO, at least in its traditional aspect, which is what Boal promoted and what is upheld at the Centre of the Theatre of the Oppressed in Rio de Janeiro.

This logic implies a process in which an oppressed collective, for example, informal mining workers, explore together and identify their oppressions as a collective. This process forces them to question their own personal and collective desires and common oppressions, and identify the oppressors—of flesh and blood—that prevent their individual fulfilment, but above all, as a social group. What would then be produced is a realistic theatrical piece (which may or may not have touches of humour but should never be a comedy) in which the oppressed themselves, the miners, would write the story, the libretto, and the dialogues; compose, perform the music, design the set, produce the piece, and, of course, act it. Once the piece is complete, it would be presented mainly in alternative circuits for other informal miners and other actors of interest within the framework of other actions articulated to the collective struggle.

Does the Chuchupe process dialogue with the TO?

From the traditional logic set out in the previous paragraph, *Chuchupe* would have little to do with a TO process. However, from a more comprehensive perspective, we could say that the

process did have some nods to TO from its spirit of social transformation through the arts and from the playful practice and theatrical exercises that it used in the construction stage of trust and group sense (several of which are systematised by Boal in his book *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*). We could also add that the topics addressed all social problems (informal mining, trafficking, prostitution, labour exploitation, corruption, structural violence, etc.) and included situations of social injustice and oppression, although it is clear that the process was not focused on the oppression of a specific group, but rather on telling and making visible, through street comedy, a specific reality foreign to the majority of the Lima population.

Another area in which we could find coincidences between *Chuchupe* and the TO is in the effect it aims to awaken in its viewers. The TO, at least from its most widespread technique, Forum Theatre, seeks—it needs, in order to be—to outrage the public. Only from indignation can the public take the risk of leaving their comfort (the seat) to transform reality (on the theatrical stage and later, eventually, in real life). That is, to use terms proposed by Boal again: to leave their role as spectator and become a spectator-actor.

Chuchupe, although as a piece it mutated quite a bit throughout the process, both in content, form, and languages, always sought to transmit a reality, denounce, raise awareness, and, as part of all this, produce indignation among viewers, not only from empathy with the oppressed in the subject matter but also towards the structural problems that the work points out (discrimination, corruption, the precariousness of the state, destruction of the environment, etc.). All this is not from theatre strictly understood, but from street comedy.

Of the Working Method

The methodological approach was a challenge from its conception given the particularities of the project context: the singularity and heterogeneity of the participants, the dissonance that the intersection between content and format (mining/street comedy) produced in me, and the absence of a specific expected result that has previous references, among others.

The tools considered to design the initial sessions or workshops came from my experience and training as an educator, group art therapist, and facilitator of forum theatre and other processes. It was clear at the beginning that this was a very diverse group in cultural, phenotypic, professional, and socioeconomic terms within a very *sui generis* framework. For this reason, it was deemed relevant to start with an individual presentation dialogue in which:

- each person who made up the group (including Oscar) could be known, as well as their experience relevant to the project;
- each person could explain their interest or particular expectation in the project; and
- recognise the group's prior knowledge on the topic of mining, particularly among the comedians.

After this initial process, which seeks to generate an environment of horizontality and honesty in order to form a sense of group, we continued with the presentation of the knowledge and experiences of specialists in mining and conservation issues in Madre de Dios (Antonio and Gabriel). At this time, there is a more traditional content transmission format in which experts in a subject share their knowledge with people who are new to the topic. Despite this format, the personality of the specialists and the quality of the information managed to interest the comedians. In this process, the strategy of guiding the conversation towards the identification of the comedians' own interests in relation to the information

shared by Gabriel and Antonio worked, as it allowed us to quickly reach the first topics of interest.

These themes are organised and exemplified with specific scenes before moving on to the stage space. In scenic games (several of which come from the TO experience), the group climate is changed, and interpersonal barriers are reduced; the unpredictable and playful nature of the creative process becomes more evident. Everyone participates, and a lot of laughter and complicity is generated. They seem to bridge the gap between comedians and "professionals" at times. In the games, aggression and anger are strongly expressed in the improvisations of almost all the members (especially the comedians). For one of them, the first scenes connect him with injustice, and he believes that the public will quickly connect, above all, with the mistreatment of the poor.

The methodology allows the creative acting and reflective participation of everyone beyond their journey. The characters begin to take shape, and the stories become clearer. The dynamic is collaborative, and a democratic climate is perceived that allows everyone to discuss ideas and participate in the future of the project. It is not determined as such, but the possibility of the participation of non-comedians on stage is being ruled out (initially there is talk of the possibility of everyone assuming roles on stage). The material that emerges is much more theatrical than street comedy. This has to do with the desire of the comedians (from their perspective, theatre has more social status than street comedy) but also with the working method and expertise of the facilitator, who comes from the Theatre of the Oppressed.

Of the Internal Processes of Comedians

From the start, Caballo (comedian Carlos Hidalgo) marks the cultural difference with his colleagues (they have more education). His clarification expresses that for him, it is a more professional space with which he perhaps does not feel identified. The individual differences between the comedians become accentuated during the experience. The educational gap between them and the self-confidence associated with their own training is made visible in moments of dialogue. Thus, Koki (comedian Jorge Santa Cruz) gradually monopolises the discussions and also the jokes. Kelvin Cordova participates with great interest in learning more, while Caballo starts out very participatory and gradually withdraws.

The three have very different personal profiles, allowing each one to later identify and fit with certain characters: Kelvin with the oppressed mining worker, Caballo with the Oppressing Foreman, etc. A certain nervousness is also perceived in the group dynamics, resembling a false confidence expressed in constant laughter and group jokes that remind me of scenes from gangster movies, where people converse with jokes and laughter, but you know that at any moment, something is going to happen (someone punches or shoots someone). An effort is noted among the participants to adapt their codes to those of the others, but this is a process that is not fully explored in these workshops. A clear perception from comedians appears and strengthens throughout the process regarding the association of theatre as something more professional than their comedy and as something that should be aimed for in the project.

Of the Final Product

Can comedy (in this case, street comedy) outrage an audience to the point of prompting action? At the end of it all, what sediments remain as an echo of collective laughter? Is something destabilised? Is something reinforced? *Chuchupe* aimed to address these questions

by combining humour with serious social issues, attempting to create a space where street comedy could challenge and engage the public on topics of oppression and injustice.