

Reflections of the Work with Comadres de Dios [Sisters of God]

Eva-Maria Dahlin

This project had so many levels of professional and personal experiences, that I don't know where to start.

So, I'll start backwards.

The outcome of my part of the project is the short play, *Comadres de Dios/Sisters of God*.

The story/stories were told by Catalina, Fortunata, Mayra, Corina, Erika, and Karla, and written down into a theatre play by me.

The play circles around six main characters, which all of them have the same name as the playwrights. (I'll come back to that later)

The play has six parallel stories, about six different women, coming from all over Peru.

It's about Karla the exact moment when her deeply beloved grandfather dies, in their house in Lima.

We meet Corina when she decides to leave her son with her mother, where they live in the northern part of Peru, to work at the bar *The Mangolovers* in the southern region of Peru. The character Mayra is in prison when her sister unexpectedly dies, and Mayra then loses her faith in God.

The character Erika, is a young married woman, living in the very south of Peru, when her husband who works for the military dies during work and leaves Erika and their newborn child with only debts.

We meet Fortunata in prison when her passed father arrives and brings her back to her childhood home, up in the Peruvian mountains.

Finally, we meet Catalina, in a small wooden boat, when she travels for eight days by the Amazonia River with her one-year-old son Hugo.

Every story, every place and every character exists side by side in the play.

The characters are sometimes witnessing, sometimes part of the situation. They comment, experience, live, laugh, and cry about what happens in front of – or to them.

There is only one place in the play all characters physically experience, the Bar Mangolovers. A bar located somewhere untold – but in connection with – the illegal gold mining industry in the region of Madre de Dios.

THE STORY DEVELOPING

The task that was given to us was to write a play in two weeks. (We didn't manage to fulfil the task, but I'll return to that later).

In the preparation part, I made it very clear to everyone, that I hoped the playwrights wouldn't try to tell the stories they thought we expected from them. Given the very unusual situation- and a group of people within the project, I was worried that the playwrights would feel expectations from the rest of the group.

I was never comfortable with the risks of being two divided groups – one group of playwrights, formed basically by their life experiences. And a group of facilitators, formed by our professions.

The first days were very dedicated to building a foundation of trust within the group. We didn't know each other personally from before, so we started to share more or less personal experiences. This part was mostly led by Ricardo and Oscar.

Parallel to that work me and Gabriel started to dive into the magic of story developing.

MY ARTISTIC IDEOLOGY WITHIN THEATRE

- **Fiction is a healing escape from reality.**
Theatre is, probably the most, collective art form. Every theatre piece is always a result of a profound collective process. (That doesn't necessarily mean it's always an agreeable process).
- **The question "What is the story?" exists in a deep symbiosis with "How do we tell the story?"**
- **The most interesting with a story is not necessarily what *is* said or told, but rather what is *not* said or told.**

Fiction is a healing escape from reality

At the end of day 2 or 3, during the first week, the playwrights had to come up with a very first suggestion of what kind of story they wanted to develop into a theatre play. They made one individual suggestion each and did a small presentation/speech for the rest of the group the next day.

All the playwrights choose a situation/scene from their own lives. They all made it very clear that they had experienced what they wanted to tell in their real lives.

For the next two days of work, the task was to “fictionalize” the scenes/situations they had chosen. A form of “distancing process” from the real, original situation started. Names were changed, sometimes gender changed, the age of the characters, and so on...

The next step was to find a way to intertwine the stories with each other.

Could one situation trigger the next one?

As an example, Erika’s husband dies in a car accident. Could it be one of the other main characters who was driving the car?

The story started to become a chain of events, that was triggered or a direct result of the previous event.

In the last day of work of the first week (Friday), we went through the storyline that had been worked through by the playwrights, for almost two working days. The story presented was a fictionalized version of their real lives and real experiences.

I sat there during the presentation, taking notes, and seeing endless possibilities of developing the story further. I remember starting to jump up and down in my chair, clapping hands (I’ll have this behaviour whenever I work, and I have a moment of “this-is-going-to-be-a-brilliant-magnificent-story”)

But at the end of the presentation, the room was completely silent. It was obvious that the playwrights weren’t satisfied with their work at all.

Whether I work with deeply experienced playwrights, not-so experienced, debutants or if I supervise students, one of my main assignments as a dramaturg is to encourage the playwright to believe in “the story” and stick with it, when they start to doubt.

Because doubt always emerges, it’s simply a part of the writing process.

That was not the case with the playwrights of *Comadres De Dios*.

It wasn’t interesting whether the story had artistic possibilities, or whether it was good fiction.

Fortunata explained: “I can’t see myself in that story, I’m simply not there”.

After the presentation, it became very clear to me, exactly what story they wanted to tell. They wanted to write about themselves and their own lives.

We never asked whether each individual story was based on true events, they were all very clear about that. Except for Catalina, her part in the play is about a character, also named Catalina, who loses her one-year-old son in the jungle and finds him later hanging dead in a tree, with all his organs taken out: *"They took everything, they took his little heart too"*. Catalina never actually said she had experienced this. But she never said she had not. I never ask a playwright whether a story is based on personal experiences. That is up to the playwright to tell.

WEEK 2

The question “What is the story?” exists in a deep symbiosis with “How do we tell the story?”

During the weekend Johanna had started to come up with a scenography suggestion, based on every playwright's individual story. The suggestion she made, facilitated a lot for the next working step we had in the story developing.

Johanna's suggestion defined a “world” so to say, where all the individual stories could appear, side by side, in front of an audience.

For example, the scenography made it possible for one character to comment on what was happening in another character's life in a completely other parts of the Peruvian landscape, or in a totally different time-space.

The scenography suggestion made it possible to open up time and space.

It was pretty much Johanna's scenography suggestion that gave the playwrights a vision of *how* their individual stories could be presented as a part of a collective, bigger story.

The bar Mangolovers, which has a very central role in the play, didn't originally appear in any of the playwrights' individual stories. It appeared in the scenography, as a “what is not said” in the stories, very present as a “non-told” aspect.

When this vision became clear through the scenography, the playwrights started to put in more and more “fiction” to their personal stories.

Corina goes back home to her son, which wasn't at that time a reality.

Fortunata becomes a little girl again and goes back to her childhood home.

God literally arrives to Mayra and helps her out of prison.

Catalina made up a butterfly to lead the character Catalina to her son.

The only one that didn't put in more fiction into the story, rather more of her own reality, was Erika. She wrote the last line of the play. The character Erika has just arrived to Bar Mangolovers and started to work there; she says to the character Karla, who's been working at the bar for a while, that she is afraid. Karla responds:

"You'll get used to it. Once you have tasted the water in Madre de Dios, you always come back".

Which is, I learned then, a common saying in Madre de Dios.

Catalina came up with the last "picture" of the play. The character Catalina, who never stops searching for her son in the jungle, finds him alive, now older. She takes her son's hand, and they walk to the river together.

The most interesting with a story is not necessarily what is said or told, rather what is not said or told.

An example of "what is not told" from the play is carried by the character Fortunata. Fortunata has a recurring line, which goes something like: "This country will soon be nothing but abandoned children". She repeats it every time one of the other characters must leave their children when they start to work at the Mangolovers bar. The same character has a backwards travel in time. When the plays start Fortunata is a grown-up woman, sitting in prison. At the end of the play, Fortunata is a 4-year-old little girl, speaking with God, asking God why her mother has abandoned her. (God has no answer to that)

What is not told here?

(Fortunata had to abandon her own children, for more than two years, while she was imprisoned).

Overall, the question "What is not told?" is very present throughout the play.

Bar Mangolovers and *The Prison* are both central parts of the story of the play. All six characters work at the bar, it's also in the bar where all characters come together. And both the bar and the prison are literally centrally placed in Johanna Mårtensson's scenography. What is not said, is *what* the characters work with at the bar, nor *why* some of them ended up in prison.

MY OWN REFLECTIONS:

Professionally the story developing part of the project wasn't much different than others. Every process starts pretty much the same, with a scene, a situation, and some characters. My working method as a dramaturg was also pretty much the same when we started to develop every individual story and finally found a way to merge them all together. I have also earlier and even after this process worked with theatre projects which are based on "true stories/experiences".

All individual stories were descriptions of a life-changing moment. In traditional dramaturgy, broadly speaking, we normally follow a chain of events that leads to a point of no return. In this play, we are literally, from beginning to end, in the eye of the storm for every character. I'm impressed by us all, that we could manage to put all these life-changing moments together and let them interact with each other, without them knocking each other out.

In a theatre process, you relate the theatre production to an expected audience. And I have still not really figured out for whom this story is made. I'm still not sure the story stands for itself, without a knowledge of the background of the process, or the playwrights behind the play. All the playwrights are very present in the story, it's their play, from the beginning to the end, but can the audience see them, feel with them? Can they?

Even though we managed to erase the distance in time and space within the concrete story, the actual play, I'm not sure the story manages to erase the distance between the story and what an actual audience will experience. Is the distance still way too big, between the reality of the play and the reality of an expected Swedish audience?

As a dramaturg and playwright, I'm totally convinced that it is possible to erase the distance between a play that, for instance, takes place in a country very far away, two hundred years ago. We erase those kinds of distances every day in the theatre. That's part of the art form. But in this case, I feel we still have a missing part. And I still haven't figured out what it is.

The social experiment is our own experience, the sharing, the friendships that were made, the moments of total devotedness to the process when time and space for a moment ends to exist

As a dramaturg, I'm of course convinced and totally sure the missing part is within the story, but I still haven't figured out yet what it is.