

Interview with Joanne Pottlitzer

February 15, 2003 Taped interview with Joanne Pottlitzer on phone.

Jim: Tell me a little about bringing up Boal in 1969 for Arena Contra Zumbi.

Joanne: In 1968 I invited Richard Schnechner to go to Latin America to meet theater people and have them meet him. And we went to five countries including Cuba which was very hard to do at the time, and of course we went to Brazil and that's where we met Augusto Boal and actually, all of this is in the little thing that I wrote, he expressed interest in coming to the States I mean his group and when I got back I was talking to Ellen Stuart at La Mama and she also thought that it would be important for Boal to come etc. etc. so I invited him. When I say glibly that I invited him, TOLA always operated on no money but we did get a grant from the Rockefeller brothers fund.

Jim: Who would have thought.

Joanne: Actually, I could tell you something off the record.

Jim: So kept.

Joanne: I had an appointment with Steve Benedict who was then at the Rockefeller Brothers fund to talk to him about giving money, and I went there and I sat and I sat and I sat and he had been out to lunch and had forgotten about the appointment all together and when he came he said, oh, I think that we got the grant partly out of Steve's...

Jim: This is guiltgelt?

Jim: Was it a big grant?

Joanne: No, we did it at St. Clements. When the American Theatre moved out of St. Clements to its own theater in New York, TOLA moved in and we did a lot of stuff at St. Clements for two years, and among them was Zumbi. And we had terrific review from the New York Times and of course that was a very political piece.

Jim: [Explains research and exchange]. Someone contacted the Cultural Attache to ask for money. Some cultural attaché agreed and then realized it was a mistake. Brasilia decided that after the review came out, the government didn't paid whatever it was. The document said a representative of the group.

Joanne: I don't remember.

Jim: I'll sent a package of the documentation. They debated for a couple of weeks That the piece became political in 1969. Originally not political, passed censor.

Joanne: Maybe they didn't know about the more obvious political things that were being said. Yes, it was about Zumbi period, but it really wasn't it was about what was happening in Brazil at the time.

Jim: The difference is that the regime wasn't cracking down in the same way. Censoring things from 1964 on. When the context changes in 69, they were much more sensitive about their international image.

Joanne: That's true.

Jim: What do you remember about the play. Did you go to Washington.

Joanne: I don't remember. It also played in West Chester County. I have a videotape. It is on tape.

Jim: It got a good review. And was extended.

Joanne: The audience loved it. And there are a whole lot of Brazilians in the New York area. And that was its first audience, of course, then after the review came out there was much more mixed audience with non-Brazilians and Americans. It's such a lively production. Three musicians was like a whole band, filled the whole space.

Jim: It was done in Portuguese.

Joanne: No, we just did a synopsis of the play. Not even that. A kind of narrative about what it was about with the music and the liveliness of the staging and the obviousness of the staging, we didn't feel that it was necessary.

Jim: So the audience that didn't understand Portuguese would be seeing something and basically enjoying something visual, the energy. Well, most people go to opera don't know what's going on.

Jim: In 1971 when Augusto gets arrested in February.

Joanne: Before that, he went back and wrote another play because we had in one of our many conversations over dinner I had told him a story about Simon Bolivar that he loved and he went back and wrote a play about it called Arena conta Bolivar.

Jim: You inspired that. You were his muse.

Joanne: So they came back in 1970 and we presented him at the public theater which was Joe Papp's Theater. Bernie Gersten was the manager of the theater at the time. He is now at the Lincoln Center. I will never forget. It opened in April. It was a huge snow storm. That also was successful. It was reviewed in the Times. Or the Voice.

Jim: That's good. I'll search the Voice.

Joanne: So they did that in 1970 and then I'd rather send you ...

Jim: [History of Tola]. . .

Joanne: How did TOLA get started. It came out of my experience in Chile in 1962. I got a rotary scholarship to study Chilean theater at the University of Chile in the Theater School and they put me in as an auditor for the third year and that whole experience of being in Chile, I mean it is not overdrawn to say that it changed my life, but it did, because I saw the United States in a new perspective, it was very jolting. I found that my student colleagues were far more well read than I was and I had already graduated from college.

Jim: Where did you go to college?

Joanne: Purdue where I had graduated in Theater. It was a very stimulating year, extraordinarily stimulating from a cultural point of view and a political point of view, and so I thought that when I came back and I eventually settled in New York, I got a job, etc. and then I thought that exchange in theater between the United States and Latin America would be a good way of presenting more accurate images of both countries. My first idea was to do it both ways, and in fact in a way with taking Richard down to Latin America that part of it happened. So first it was just going to be with Chile and I wanted to get some of the plays that I thought were really good produced here. I got them translated and tried to get them produced. Do you remember Jorge Diaz's *The Toothbrush*. Well talked to Anne Jackson and Eli Wallach about doing that and they didn't, of course. At any rate, I guess in talking to friends, they said, well why don't you go to the cultural attaché of Chile and talk to him about it. At the time the cultural attaché of Chile was N? Antunes who is one of Chile's foremost painters.

Jim: This would have been what year?

Joanne: That would have been in 1967. So, I did and he was very excited about the idea, so we decided to form an organization and [another thing off the record]. We were trying to think of a name for the organization. Let me see if I can remember. I can't remember what it was, the anagram was something of Latin American American Performance, the anagram was CLAP which we thought was wonderful thinking of applause, and I didn't know what it meant. That's how naïve I was. Neither did he. So I called one of the other board members who had agreed to be on the Board and I told him all excited and he said Joanne you've got to be kidding. You won't say that. So we came up with the boring, theater of Latin America TOLA. At any rate, at the time I was working for the Institute of International Education with the Fulbright Program and one of the people on one of our committees was a Mexican professor from Rutgers and I told him about the idea and he said oh you shouldn't do that just for Chile, but for all of Latin America and so that's how we did it. And in that year, 1967, I took a trip to Latin America. I got my airfare through Peruvian airlines, just went from country to country and every place that I went people would give me names of people in other countries. I started in Mexico and the

only name I had was Alejandro Vorosky and then through him I met Juan Jose Gorolao, all of the Mexicans, so that was the first trip. Then in 68, we found out that ITUCH, Insitituto de Teatro de Universidad de Chile, which is the professional theater company associated with the school was coming to California because there was this program between the University of California and the University of Chile. So when I found out that I send to I? that they're in California, we have to bring them to New York and we did with. When I got a thousand dollars from of all places Anaconda copper and they had to read the play which was *La Remolianda* which was just a folk play by Alejandro S?, they gave us a thousand dollars and I? almost dropped dead and said you can't do that on just a thousand dollars and I said raise some more money, so he did. He raised, I think we had. This is a nice story. I may be going on. Nimecio raised another \$6000. So we had seven thousand dollars and I went to the International Theater Institute that was headed by Roselyn Gilder who was extrodinary woman and told her what I wanted to do and she said, when are them coming and I told her in a month. And instead of saying to me, you are crazy, you will never be able to do that in a month, she said, well, you have a lot of work ahead of you. So she found a public relations firm for me who were the people who did *Fiddler on the Roof* they were terrific and they were the ones who did Arena contra Zumbi because we brought ITUCH in February of 1968. So we got the public relations firm, they said we needed a logo so I called Nimecio and he said, oh, Fernando ?, he loves to do that, so I called him, it was 11:00 at night, would you be willing to do a logo for the Times ad, he said sure, when do you need it. I said tomorrow morning and he did it; it was wonderful. And Victor Jara come. He directed the play. He was the director.

Jim: Victor Jara was in the United States? I had no idea.

Joanne: We were going around the streets of Manhattan in the prop shops because they only flew in the main set.

I knew Victor from Chile because he was from the theater school.

I got a theater which was a 500 seat house in B? Plaza Hotel in the physical Broadway area, and this was the first time I produced and I had to deal with all of the unions and you know not only the stage hands, the people who brought the set from the truck to the curb and another who brought it in from the curb to the theater. I hired a company manager, so he took care of most of that. And I got mailing lists from the Public Theater, from the Hispanic Theaters here in New York and of course the publicity in the Times and the Voice and we made enough money from box office to cover all the costs which I think were \$16,000 minus a thousand dollars so I took out a personal loan and was paying it off. You don't know these names but Gabriel Valdez who at the time was the Chilean ambassador to the UN and a good friend of Nimesio's when he went back to Chile he was foreign minister under Frei and all of a sudden Nimesio called and said that he had sent a \$1000 from the Foreign Ministry to cover that. I didn't even ask for it. So that was our first production.

Jim: When you went with Richard to Latin America in 1968 did you only see Boal.

Joanne: Oh, no, we saw loads of people.

Jim: You hooked up with Boal, you didn't bring up other people.

Joanne: No, ... No, but I did bring Gilberto Gil.

Jim: You're kidding.

Joanne: In 1971.

Jim: ...

Joanne: Gil and I fought like hell for a review in the Times but they wouldn't do it because it was going to be here so short a time, finally they sent someone the last night and got a rave review so that he could come back any time he wanted. And H lio Ot cio designed the set.

Jim: [About Gil and Caetano]

Joanne: I think I also have the review from that.

Jim: And then you led it to 1981.

Joanne: In 1979 we did a huge interamerican festival. I think the last thing that we did was to bring Tres Marias e una rosa from Chile. But the Festival in 1979 was enormous at the Kennedy Center, two theaters at La Mama and another theater near La Mama. We brought Macuniama. The first time it went out of Brazil.

Jim: [gives background about relationship to Brazil]

Joanne: Teatro Oficina was a part of the festival. Brazil had a big delegation.

Jim: The chapter will focus on 69...

Joanne: Only five of the signatures were published by the Times. I had fifteen signatures.

Latin American Fair of Opinion.

Jim: It seems that the Brazilians were very dismissive.

Joanne: Well, it won an OBIE.

Jim: What I have is a seven page report, the Brazilians sent a report.

Joanne: It was very successful. There was an art exhibit that was terribly political. Gato Babaeira played before he got famous. Chico Burarque backed out. Boal said it was because he was shy, but I don't know.

Jim: Chico is timid, etc....

Joanne: The theater part of it. We did the prologue in the downstairs part and then the audience went upstairs. The prologue was Boal's torture session from Toquemada. He selected the other plays. My god, not political.

Jim: Explaining the report. ... Public forums on debates.

Joanne: Michael Harrington.

Jim: Tell me more.

Joanne: Hell of a thing to do. One an Obie. Whole production won an Obie. Theater of Latin America won the Obie for the Fair of Opinion.

Jim: Fabulous.

[cut]

Jim: Got involved in Chile?

Joanne: I took two years of Spanish in highschool and two years of Latin, and I probably would have taken French.

Jim: Why Chile.

Joanne: Quite by accident. I kept up my Spanish in college which you know I would take a course a semester to keep up with it. I had told people that I had wanted to go to a Spanish speaking country after I graduated to stay for a while and I had already graduated and a professor from Purdue called me, someone I had never had in class, and said something had come across his desk that he thought I'd be interested in, a Rotary international scholarship application and I had five days to fill it out. I seem to always be at the last minute. It so happened that my grandfather was very active in Rotary and was the president of the local club and my father had been a member for a while but he had dropped out, but anyway, the Rotarians knew my family, which doesn't hurt, and I had quite an average in college, I was no slouch, but so anyway I decided that I wanted to go to Spain, I knew nothing about Latin America, but Spain wasn't included in the Fulbright because it didn't participate in the Marshall Plan and not in any other of the international fellowship programs followed suit, so I couldn't go to Spain so I wanted to go to another place that spoke Spanish and study their theater so I interviewed Latin American students on campus to see where theater was of interest, somewhere further away than Mexico because I actually spent a summer in Mexico between my sophomore and junior

years and that's close enough and I wanted to go somewhere where I couldn't afford to go otherwise. It came down between Argentina and Chile. At that time Argentina was doing very interesting theater and I went to Chile quite frankly because the Chileans I interviewed convinced me that they were nicer than the Argentines. There was no vision, there was no analysis.

Jim: Many people got involved in Latin America and changed their lives.

Thanks....