

Review of *Anthropocosmic Theatre: Theatre, Ritual, Consciousness*, by Nicolás Núñez, Trans. Ronan J. Fitzsimons and Helena Guardia
Revised and expanded edition, edited by Deborah Middleton and Franc Chamberlain.
University of Huddersfield Press, 2019. 387pp.

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Nicolás Núñez's *Anthropocosmic Theatre* is a multi-faceted book that focuses on one of the most original and long-running projects of contemporary performing arts anywhere. This second, revised and expanded edition is something to celebrate, as it updates and makes easily available (and free to download) for English-speaking readers a book that demonstrates how performing arts can be a vehicle for self-knowledge and intercultural exploration. Hailing from Mexico City, Núñez founded the National Autonomous University's *Taller de Investigación Teatral* (Theatre Research Workshop) in 1975. From its beginning, the group has been committed to creating participatory performance events firmly grounded in the multi-layered cultural traditions of Mexico and the world. Núñez is interested in theatre not as an aesthetic spectacle, but as a creative means of enhancing awareness of our bodies, and connecting with other people and cultures. The Workshop's "Anthropocosmic" project aims to develop "devices of 'participatory theatre' which give back to our organism its capacity to be the echo box of the cosmos." (7)

If this purpose sounds at first glance ambitious or New Age, the book is testimony of a rigorous research and performance methodology developed by the *Taller de Investigación Teatral* over its 45 years of existence. Today Núñez and his colleagues are still going strong, offering workshops and performances to people from all walks of life in Mexico City's Chapultepec Park and abroad. This edition of *Anthropocosmic Theatre* is divided in two parts, the first authored by Núñez, spans the Workshop's initial stage from 1975 to 1990. The second part – "Beyond Anthropocosmic Theatre" - is a previously unpublished anthology of articles from different authors who offer an understanding of the new directions taken by the project, especially in workshops offered in Mexico and the United Kingdom.

As someone who closely followed Núñez's work in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it's astonishing to find how this book, nearly 400 pages long, grew out of its first Mexican edition of 1983, spanning only 70 pages (and published along with an essay by Richard Schechner on postmodern performance). For young students like myself at the time, that slim but powerful book served as a manifesto for what theatre could be: a path of knowledge connecting with indigenous traditions of our land. The theatrical scene in Mexico at the time was largely conventional in its aesthetics, although important exceptions can be found in the Panic Theatre experiments of Alexander Jodorowsky (the Chilean avant-garde director who lived in Mexico from 1963 to 1973), the visionary work of Juan José Gurrola, and the performances of Jesusa Rodríguez, among a few other examples. While fellow theatre practitioners have often deemed Núñez's work eccentric or esoteric, his *Taller de Investigación Teatral* is respected, and has maintained steady patronage from Mexico's National Autonomous University, helping to keep most of their productions and workshops locally as non-profit endeavours.

The first *Taller de Investigación Teatral* event I participated in was *Huracán, Corazón del Cielo* (1985), which was especially meaningful, as it was open to the public in the year Mexico City suffered a devastating earthquake. The immersive, sensory experience of this performance served as a kind of healing ritual for many of us, and convinced me that I wanted to follow this creative path. I have no doubt that for many like me, participating in Núñez's events and workshops can be a life-changing experience.

Anthropocosmic Theatre opens with Núñez sharing his personal journey through mostly non-Western performance traditions. The first two chapters, titled "Tibetan Theatre" and "Nahuatlan Theatre", provide a fascinating insight into these, for Western readers, little-known traditions, which the author and his colleagues have studied first-hand. While it can be argued that the term "theatre" is misleading when discussing performances deeply imbedded in ritual, Núñez is clear that he is not writing from the perspective of the scholar, but rather of the practitioner seeking to establish a creative dialogue with living traditions. The section continues with insights into how Núñez and his colleagues learned from some of the most prominent Western theatre *maestros*, most notably Jerzy

Grotowski, with whom they established a professional association, collaborating in the Theatre of Sources project during the early 1980s, and also organizing one of Grotowski's visits to Mexico.

The section's final chapter focuses on the Anthropocosmic Theatre methodology, which can be useful for people working with all kinds of performance genres, as it aims to develop an embodied awareness of one's personal identity grounded in the here and now. Núñez describes, for example, ways of working with active silence, and listening to our own bodies in relation to the surrounding environment in order to develop an understanding of our "psychophysical instrument". The chapter shows how this methodology applies philosophical notions derived from Nahua thought, and also some principles proposed by Grotowski in his Theatre Laboratory. It is clear Núñez has avoided the trap of becoming an imitator or blind follower of the famous Polish director's work, and has rather developed his own unique path, to be shared with others in workshops and books such as this one.

The only issue I have with the English edition of the original *Teatro Antropocósmico* is the quality of the translation, which at times is awkward or even inaccurate. For example, where it reads "Central America", it should say "Mesoamerica", a cultural region spanning roughly from present-day Nicaragua to central Mexico, where the Olmec, Nahua, Zapotec and Maya civilizations originated. I also miss the photos that are featured in the Mexican edition, but understand the negatives might no longer be available. I would recommend a revised printing of Núñez's text seek to use a gender-inclusive writing mode.

The volume's second part, edited by Deborah Middleton and Franc Chamberlain, comprises several scholarly essays, recent writings by Núñez, as well as testimonies from people who have participated in Núñez's workshops and performance events. This new section significantly expands the original edition of *Anthropocosmic Theatre* and offers insight into more recent aspects of the work, especially the *Citlalmína* "dynamic", a unique dance sequence developed by Núñez as a "meditation-in-movement"

experience, which bridges Nahua and Tibetan performative traditions. The essays by Middleton and Chamberlain are to be especially noted for their clarity, and are extremely helpful in understanding the scope and depth of Núñez's work. This section includes some welcome bonus materials, such as Núñez's previously unpublished one-act play *Mandala: The Sacred Art of Acting*, and his essay on "High-risk Theatre".

I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in intercultural theatre, and in learning how performance can be a vehicle for embodied knowledge.