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The Conditions of Production Surrounding “Crawling with Monsters”: A Way To Create Social Consciousness Through Theatre in South Texas

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THE CONDITIONS OF PRODUCTION SURROUNDING *CRAWLING WITH*
MONSTERS: A WAY TO CREATE SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS THROUGH THEATRE IN
SOUTH TEXAS

A Thesis

by

JORGE AUGUSTO CONTRERAS

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Texas-Pan American
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2012

Major Subject: Theatre

THE CONDITIONS OF PRODUCTION SURROUNDING *CRAWLING WITH*
MONSTERS: A WAY TO CREATE SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS THROUGH THEATRE IN
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May 2012

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ABSTRACT

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Evaluating theatre's actual contribution to social development is subjective. There is a specific field of study that has been born from the need to incorporate all theatre outside the mainstream that seeks to do more than entertain an audience: “Applied Drama” or “Applied Theatre.”

This study argues that through the process of creating the play *Crawling with Monsters* a group of UTPA students were empowered to make social change and ended up doing a critically acclaimed applied drama project regarding Mexico's drug war. After an introduction to the formation of the group and the situation to which it was responding, Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* provides a theoretical basis for looking at the experiences of the group and at several interviews with the participants; we see how this production changed their perspectives and encouraged them to become contributors of social development.

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CHAPTER I. PREFACE

“Coragem de ser feliz”
“Ten el coraje de ser feliz”
“Have the courage to be happy”

Augusto Boal

Dear reader:

I have a disclosure to make: My work is touched by the atrocious reality that as a Mexican-American I have had to face during these last six years. My country is in a civil war between the government and the drug cartels. My life was affected; I could not face my reality. My life was going to waste, and I became desperate, anxious, sick of “everything,” sick of nothing. I was clinically diagnosed with anxiety and depression, but in the middle of my own mental revolution something happened, theatre.

I do believe in the power of theatre to generate social change. I trust that through theatre I can do something about the terrible reality that my country is facing nowadays. While I’m writing these lines my family is in the living room watching the breaking news about how fifty-two people were burned to death inside a casino by one of the criminal groups that are having a war in my hometown city of Monterrey, Nuevo Leon, Mexico. The Mexican drug cartels are taking control over most of my country, they are struggling for “la plaza,” the markets that they control to distribute the drugs. It’s a fierce fight between different cartels, the Mexican army, the police forces, and criminal mercenaries; today Mexico lives under warlike conditions. While I’m

writing this confession one of the main lines of *Crawling with Monsters*, the play on which I have been working for the last couple of years, constantly resonates in my head: "It's not about us, it's not about us..." Is it really not about us? Is it really not about me? Those questions have to be answered through this work. That is my hope.

What I know so far is that theatre is the way by which I finally feel that I'm doing something about this entire crisis, a way in which I can explore my deeper fears, anxieties, search my inner self and fulfill my desires to do something about the Mexican drug war; at least speak for the people in distress; at least convey a message of urgency, a cry for help. Mexico has been under civil war for the last five years and nobody seems to care much about it, not the international media, nor the international organizations, governmental or nongovernmental (UN, Amnesty International, etc.), and the American government shows more interest in its "War on terror" and how they are going to end it than in the war on their border. The U.S. government has placed Mexico's drug war as a secondary issue on its agenda and it does not seem that the American population is aware of what is really going on south of the border.

The reason for my confession is because I want to talk to you, my reader, as directly as possible, take down my masks, see you in the eye through my written words and tell you who I really am: I'm a believer, an idealist, a dreamer. I am a devotee of theatre who strongly believes in its power to change people for the better, to change society for the better. The aim of this work is not to question the efficacy of theatre and drama in these matters. Whether we see it or not, theatre has always been there to proclaim change, to contribute to human evolution, to create dissimilar opinions, diverse ideas, debates in which the clash of these differences of thought will be resolved during and after performance for both parties, the performers and the audiences.

Above all, the purpose of this work is to explore the effects of this theatre on my own life, as well as on the particular group of actors I have been working with; to analyze the conditions of production for the creation, construction and performance of a play about the drug war on the border of South Texas and northeastern Mexico. The play I am talking about is *Crawling with Monsters*, a documentary theatre piece, which tells the stories of people from Reynosa, Matamoros, Monterrey, Ciudad Mier, and other border towns that unfortunately have had to suffer the effects of the confrontations between the Mexican authorities and the cartels.

My belief in the theatre as a tool for social development is important to this particular study mainly for two reasons: first, because I'm an actor and I want to apply all my efforts and knowledge in acting for the benefit of humankind and second, because of the huge difficulty my country is facing. Since 2006, when current Mexican President Felipe Calderon Hinojosa declared war on the drug cartels, more than fifty thousand people have died. Hundreds of thousands of people have relocated from their towns. And international experts have concluded that the Mexican government is not able to win this war. So, what can we do? When a situation like this gets out of the control of the authorities, it becomes time for society to take a greater role, to explore new ways in which everybody can cooperate and help solve the matter.

Through the arts, at least we must communicate what is happening; theatre has been the way for me. I believe in the bi-directional communication of drama. The message goes both ways. The actor shares, but the audience shares as well. Through the sharing experience of drama, actors transform themselves, as they help transform audiences. Drama is action.

As I said, this is my belief, this is my statement, it may be a personal opinion, but it is based on my own life experience. My intention is not to make you believe as I do or to think as I

think; I'm only sharing with you the experiences I went through. I had the wonderful opportunity of getting some realization through the arts. Theatre helped me understand life in a better way, to amplify my comprehension of the human race, and to understand the tough times that I have had to experience in Mexico. I moved from a passive role to an active one. I took control over my own life, redirected my actions and I did what I needed to do: tell others what is happening in Mexico, tell them what is going on in the life of the people I care for the most. In brief, for me the power of theatre is unquestionable and the real aim of my work is to look at how theatre shapes us, to explore and to share how theatre helped this particular group of people to do something regarding this crisis.

CHAPTER II. INTRODUCTION

“Art is not merely contemplation, it is also action, and all action changes the world, at least a little.”

Tony Kushner

Evaluating theatre's actual contribution to social development is subjective. Drama theorists and scholars constantly seek ways to define the potential of the theatre and its benefits for human beings at an individual level and as a community. It has always been quite complex to establish a common agreement about how much the theatre serves as a tool to support social development along with its possibilities in creating human consciousness. However, during the past twenty years, a specific field has been born from the need to incorporate all theatre outside the mainstream that seeks to do more than entertain an audience: “Applied Drama” or “Applied Theatre.”

“Applied Drama” is a term that refers to all kinds of theatre outside the commercial scheme; commonly used by scholars, practitioners, educators and theorists of drama to refer to the theatre employed for particular purposes concerning education, community awareness, political issues, social or individual development, and other aspects of drama outside the mainstream theatre. Helen Nicholson, a scholar/writer of educational theatre defines it as “a shorthand to describe forms of dramatic activity that primarily exist outside conventional mainstream institutions, and which are specifically intended to benefit individuals, communities

and societies...in other words, applied drama and applied theatre are interdisciplinary and hybrid practices” (Nicholson, 2).

Applied Drama is interdisciplinary because it not only involves theatre features, but also includes psychology, sociology, pedagogy, among other disciplines; hybrid, because it is not completely a theatrical practice, engaging common practices in teaching, oratory, motivational speech, psychological therapies and other things that together contribute to the final purpose of this kind of theatre, which is to make a tangible contribution to society.

Practitioners of Applied Drama are using theatre around the world in order to create social awareness and aid communities immersed in situations of conflict. For example, Bongani Linda, with the “Victory Sonqoba Theatre Company” in South Africa, helped black-centered neighborhoods to integrate into interracial communities after *apartheid*; “The Wedding Community Play Project” in Ireland aids Protestant and Catholic communities to come together in a play in which a Catholic groom and a Protestant bride get married in both religions, with the goal of bringing these two communities together; and the very well known “Theatre of The Oppressed” of Augusto Boal, which was born as a community theatre project in the *fabelas* (ghettos) of Río de Janeiro, Brazil, and has expanded all over the world. These are only a few examples of how theatre can be used for community development in societies experiencing major crises or challenges.

In this essay, I talk about *Crawling with Monsters*, a university play that in my view ended up being one of the most courageous theatre projects regarding Mexico’s drug war. Through this play, its participants, actors and audiences, encountered a space to explore the crude reality that contemporary Mexican society is experiencing. This theatre piece not only

demonstrates the great power that theatre has to create consciousness, but also reveals how a group of students can be transformed by the process of creating a play that deals with their own harsh reality.

I will describe my personal discovery of the ways in which applied drama can empower a person, and how they affected others involved in the production. The argument is that after the process of putting the play together, we the actors were no longer the same. *Crawling with Monsters* changed us, made us believe not only in the power of theatre, but also in ourselves as potential contributors to society.

A series of conditions and factors emerged to make all these experiences happen. First, as I mentioned, consider the current situation in Mexico today. The so-called drug war is gravely impacting the whole northeastern Mexico and is starting to spread to the Rio Grande Valley; other factors stem from the nature of the Rio Grande Valley itself, its geography, the river, the border, the clash of two countries, two cultures, two languages. There is also the situation of the Department of Communication at the University of Texas - Pan American, the university with which the cast and crew of *Crawling with Monsters* is affiliated. If we analyze the current events at the theatre program at UTPA, we will find out how a theatre program in an American university is dealing with the fact that the majority of its students have an Hispanic origin, how this is leading to certain changes inside the department and in the likes and dislikes of its students. All these factors combined helped to determine what later became a theatre group called “The Sleepy Border Town Insomniacs” and its play, *Crawling with Monsters*. Through the exploration of these three factors, we encounter how this project was born, and how its implementation led this group of students to have a transformational experience through theatre.

This work is going to be presented in different sections. After a brief introduction to the "Sleepy Border Town Insomniacs," I am going to talk about Mexico's drug war, then about the Rio Grande Valley, and finally I am going to focus on the University of Texas - Pan American and its theatre program. Following my analysis of these three conditions in a separate way, I will talk about *Crawling with Monsters* and how this play shaped them. Once I have analyzed all these elements I will discuss the interviews that I conducted with some members of the company and, through Augusto Boal's theoretical approach in *Theatre of the Oppressed*, I will be analyzing how this theatrical production may have changed the perspectives of these people.

The Revolutionary Nature of Theatre and the Origin of Applied Drama.

If we go to the roots and origins of Applied Drama, we can trace them all the way to Ancient Greece, where western theatre was born. All about western drama starts with the Greeks. "We still cannot say exactly *how* theatrical drama comes into being, but the *when* and the *where* are no longer at all obscure. Everything that we recognize today as drama traces its origin to sixth-century Attica, where tragedy, reputedly the invention of Thespis of Icaria, is accepted and developed in Athens itself under Peisistratus." (Bennett 2005, 4) But we can say that Thespis was not only the first actor/protagonist, but also the first great contributor of Applied Theatre. The development of the theatre since its beginning obeys a natural order of evolution, it's always evolving, adjusting for and by human beings to fulfill their needs. The flux of changes in the theatre responds basically to societal changes. If Thespis stood up as the first actor, it is because at that moment in history Greek society was ready for it.

Theatre as any other form of art is intrinsic to human nature. Human beings have in part developed their societies through art; we have grown with it, and the arts evolution is directly related to our own development. The theatre began to exist as a ritual, as a practice with a religious basis, when a person from one group stood up and began to tell a story. It took only two elements to initiate the theatrical experience, first, a person who tells a story and, second, the listener(s). Theatre was born in the precise moment in which these two elements clash. It is not coincidence that the theatre emerged in diverse places of the world at the same time. East did not copy the West, nor vice versa. The theatre emerged as an activity of human nature in all cultures in different periods of time all along human history. Some of the imperative questions related to theatre history are: Why does theatre exist? Which objective has the theatre? And why has it accompanied us throughout our history? These inquiries could have many answers, but we can summarize them in one: the theatre responds to patterns of human behavior. The theatre is revolutionary, and serves as a departure for any social group, ethnicity or culture that wants to promote social change or establish who they are in front of other groups. My belief is that all theatre is revolutionary and that from this aspect of it was born applied drama.

CHAPTER III. WHO ARE THE "SLEEPY BORDER TOWN INSOMNIACS"?

"Theatre is a form of knowledge; it should and can also be a means of transforming society. Theatre can help us build our future, rather than just waiting for it."

Augusto Boal

"The Sleepy Border Town Insomniacs" was born in the spring of 2010, when Dr. Eric Wiley, a professor of the Theatre/TV/Film Area of the Department of Communication at UTPA started working with some of the students on an independent school project. He wanted to do a show completely in Spanish; so, he decided to do it outside the school and to do it for children. The first play they performed was *La Lente Maravillosa*, by Emilio Carballido, the Mexican playwright. The play had a great reception in schools and libraries around the McAllen, Texas, area; they ended up performing for more than two thousand kids. Dr. Wiley had also intended originally to do performances south of the border, in the cities of Reynosa and Matamoros. In fact, they were invited to perform at schools in both cities and at an arts festival in Matamoros. But that spring the violence in Northeast Mexico increased exponentially, obligating the group to cancel their tour. The University of Texas system forbade all student travel to Mexico due to the situation. It was then when Dr. Wiley decided to do something related to Mexico problem, and he thought that a theatrical play could be a good way to respond to what was happening.

The children play that we were doing on the border turned into a documentary theatre piece on the Mexican drug war and its effects on children. *Crawling with Monsters* was born

from the ignorance of our community and from the necessity to communicate obvious facts such as the death of thousands of people a few kilometers south of the Texas border. Even if the people south of the border were living in extremely hard conditions in which murders and shootings occurred on a daily basis, our south Texan society seemed almost proud of its unawareness by ignoring the situation and not doing anything about it. The project evolved from this problematic into an effort to research what was really going on, and to figure out how the group could represent the crisis on stage, and how to take it to other parts of the United States and at least allow the voices of the victims to be heard.

Crawling with Monsters was first performed in November 2010, at the New Orleans Fringe Festival, in New Orleans, Louisiana. The producer/director of the play, Dr. Eric Wiley, entered the play into one of the most experimental theatre festivals in the United States, hoping to get a chance to perform out of state. Surprisingly, the first adventure of this theatre company not only went well, but this first trip also made a good impression on Joseph Furnari, a theatre educator who is the Treasurer of the American Alliance for Theatre and Education (AATE), and who later became a special friend of the group. That first encounter would eventually lead to the group's performing at the AATE Conference in Chicago during the summer of 2011. One month after that trip, the group went to New York to perform at the New York International Fringe Festival 2011. The company is still alive, working, researching, preparing to keep sending the message, conveying the truth almost no one in Mexico is willing to convey. But perhaps as important as the external results of the play itself are the changes in the people who were part of it. Which changes occurred in the actors? What did they learn through all this? How has this experience affected their lives? By this moment *Crawling with Monsters* just perform at the

Luminaria Arts Festival in San Antonio on May 5, 2012, but more important than that is that its members, former and current, are no longer the same as when they joined the project.

But what exactly is this play? *Crawling with Monsters* is a documentary theatre play that Dr. Wiley put together using interviews that the "Sleepy Border Town Insomniacs" did; information about the drug war in Mexico, mainly from newspaper articles, blogs, websites, pictures and videos; live Mexican music from members of the group. At the beginning, Dr. Wiley thought that we could be able to do a project like the *Laramie Project*. He quickly discovered that the situation in Mexico and the risks the students would be taking by walking into a country in a civil war and interviewing everybody in public would be too dangerous. We decided to do the interviews, but mainly among our close friends and family. After months of work we put all the interviews together and translated them. Dr. Wiley wrote the script based on the responses of the people interviewed and the story of how his student group was not able to perform in Mexico.

The play has only one act with no intermissions. We can identify two different parts in the play, the first half explains how the whole idea of making *Crawling with Monsters* fall into place, from the moment we were doing the children play in Spanish to how we were not able to go and perform it at Mexico; the second half is mainly composed by the interviews and stories of the people who anonymously contribute with us, with just some exceptions in which we show videos of the RGV, Reynosa, Matamoros, and Monterrey accompanied by original songs composed by the musicians in the group. Throughout the play a projectionist is accompanying and supporting what the actors are doing with a power point presentation composed of pictures, quotes and videos. Dr. Wiley has worked on the length of the play in order to make it fit depending on each festival requirements, for example, in New Orleans we did a forty five minute version of

the show, but in New York we did an hour and a half version. As a final outcome, we have a theatre piece that is also a documentary on the drug war on the border supported by multimedia tools and Mexican live music.

CHAPTER IV. MEXICO'S DRUG WAR AND THE THEATRE.

"I like the adrenaline. I like to go on patrol. When I grab a Zeta or Chapo I kill him. Why should I interrogate him? He can go to Saint Peter and tell him what he has done. The Army has security and intelligence, we don't need information. The day they catch me, they are not going to give me kisses, right? They are going to cut me into pieces. So what? That's what I am exposed to. If my day comes, we fight, that is it. "

General Carlos Bibiano Villa Castillo
Mexican Army

"In addition to the life-death cycle basic to nature, there is also an unnatural 'living death': life which is denied its fullness."

Paulo Freire,
Pedagogy of the Oppressed

The current drug war is, without a doubt, the bloodiest experience Mexico has experienced since the first quarter of the twentieth century when the Mexican Revolution took place. It has inspired the *Sleepy Border Town Insomniacs* to bring greater awareness to people misinformed about the deplorable situation that Mexican society is enduring. From December, 2006, to September, 2011, when President Felipe Calderón was in office, 47,515 people were killed in drug-related violence. (The New York Times, 2012) Today some sources state that the real number of deaths is more than fifty thousand. What is known now as "La Guerra del Narco" (The War on Drugs), evolved from a confrontation between some of the drug cartels and Mexican authorities into a civil war. Due to the scarce press coverage of the "situation," many

outsiders do not really believe what is going on. People are living in war-like conditions, in which everyday, innocent civilians die on the streets.

Shootings, persecutions and clashes between the federal, state, and local authorities against organized crime, take place on a daily basis in the streets of most cities in México. In northeastern Mexico, some of the cities most gravely affected by the war are Reynosa, Ciudad Juarez, Ciudad Victoria, and Monterrey. The deep corruption among and between the authorities at all levels increases the complexity of the problem. Some experts have declared that this war is already beyond the capability of the Mexican Government. "The inability to control the violence, with fresh horrors nearly every week, has rattled even some admirers in the United States Congress, who have begun to question publicly whether Mr. Calderon's strategy — supported by the \$1.4 billion in anticrime aid the United States is providing through the multiyear Merida Initiative — is making progress." (The New York Times, 2012). But whether the results of the Calderon administration is strategies are successful or not, it is clear that Mexican society is the one who is paying the highest price of this war.

Because of the mass murders, kidnappings, robberies, assaults, and the involvement of local and state authorities in cartel activities, the federal government is mostly relying on the Mexican army to control the streets. Colonels and Sergeants from the Mexican army are taking the positions of former police officers that have been caught cooperating with the drug dealers. There are many Mexican towns living under martial law. Tamaulipas, one of the most aggrieved states, has several border towns neighboring South Texas. Towns such as Miguel Aleman, Ciudad Camargo, Ciudad Mier, Reynosa, and Matamoros are becoming a type of ghost town from which many of the residents relocated themselves to places throughout north Mexico, but a

lot of these people have also crossed north of the river to start a new life in South Texas. The towns they have left are often just meters south of the Rio Grande borderline.

Indeed, rather than receding to levels acceptable to the Mexican government, the violence in Mexico has increased. The violence seems to have shifted geographically over time from some cities to others, but this has to do mainly with the flows of the confrontations between the crime groups and not because of any positive action on the part of the Mexican government. As I mentioned, the Mexican national press coverage of the situation is almost non-existent. Mexico is one of the most dangerous countries for journalists. "Mexico's national human rights commission says 74 {reporters} were slain from 2000 to 2011," making the situation for reporters in the country comparable to what is found in countries like Afghanistan or Iraq. (CBS News, 2012) In fact, some of the local newspapers have given up their right to a free press, and have openly accepted that today they only cover issues approved by some criminal groups, mainly because of their fear of reprisals. The ferocity, cruelty, and malicious methods by which these criminal groups precede is really horrific: slaughtering, biting to death, and incinerating victims alive, including the aged, women, and young people. In most of the cases these civilians have nothing to do with any other criminal organization.

The war has not spared children. The non-governmental organization *Rights of Childhood in Mexico* (REDIM) says some thirteen hundred minors have been killed since Calderon's war began. A REDIM report at the start of 2011 showed the violence killed 994 children prior to November 2010, or around twenty-one on average each month. In the eight months since REDIM report about three hundred more have died — at an average of nearly thirty eight per month." (Gutiérrez, 2011) Nearly half of the Mexican population is under the age of twenty-five,

The National Institute for Geography and Statistics (INEGI) states that the total population of Mexico in 2011 was 112 million, of which 53 million were 24 years old or less. (INEGI, 2012) Following the World Bank 2011 Review around 46.2 percent of Mexico's total population (52 million people) live in poverty (World Bank, 2011). Most of the drug cartels thus find it easy to recruit poor young people to replace the losses of the battle. For a few thousand pesos a month these youths can find a better life working for the cartels than working in a regular job. Following the Mexican *National Commission for Minimum Wage (CONASAMI)*, the official minimum wage in Mexico is \$60.66 pesos per day (CONASAMI, 2012), around \$4.50 US dollars per eight hours of work. That amount is three times less what they can usually earn working for the dealers. With all these factors, if Calderon's administration is not able to win this war by the end of his term (December 1st, 2012), Mexican society will be like a pressure cooker waiting to explode.

Moreover, the inability of the Mexican government to stop criminal organizations lies mainly in two developments: first, the growing market in the United States for Mexican and South American drugs, and, second, the inability of the Mexican Army to disarm the cartels. According to the *United States Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA)*, "the illegal drug market in the United States is one of the most profitable in the world. As such, it attracts the most ruthless, sophisticated, and aggressive drug traffickers." (DEA, 2012) No matter how many weapons the Mexican army seizes, the criminals just keep arming themselves; sometimes they are better armed than the army. This has to do with the weak regulations of the firearms market in the United States, the principal provider of weapons to the cartels. A recent report from the *Federation of American Scientists*, one of the most influential American non-governmental organizations/Think Tanks, stated that "In the United States, which has notably weaker firearm

laws than other industrialized nations, virtually any adult who is not a convicted felon can legally purchase and possess a handgun." (FAS, 2011) Many of these arms end up in the Mexican and other black markets around the World. "Weak domestic firearms laws in the United States not only affect individuals living in that country, but also adversely affect neighboring countries to the north and south. For example, the leading source of black market weapons in Mexico is the United States." (FAS, 2011) It is clear that a major reform in the U.S. arm enforcement regulations can contribute greatly to the process of disarming criminal groups in Mexico, but years may pass before we see any slight change to these regulations.

It is impossible to know exactly how many firearms are illegally smuggled into Mexico in any given period of time, but according to data from the *Department of Justice's Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives*, about 87% of the firearms seized by Mexican authorities and traced in the last five years (2004-2009) originated in the U.S. (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2011) Based on updated ATF tracing data, of the 29,284 firearms seized and successfully traced in Mexico in 2009 and 2010, 20,504 or seventy percent came from a US source (meaning a gun shop, gun show, or private sale). Sixty nine percent of *those* firearms were sold in California, Arizona, or Texas. (Longmire, 2011). In addition, we have to consider the astonishing amount of commerce across the border between these two countries and the increase of Mexican nationals who are residing permanently in U.S. territory. These factors play a key role in the augmentation of the illicit trade, for both arms and drugs. "The most obvious players in the gun trade are the cartels themselves, which not only have the financial resources to buy guns in the United States but also are in a position to receive guns in trade for narcotics from their distribution contacts north of the border" (Burton & Stewart, 2007). In conclusion, we have a country full of youth under the poverty line that is not only a producer of drugs, but also the

pathway for most of the South American drugs en-route to the United States market, and, in addition, one that borders the principal producer and exporter of weapons on the black market.

When a situation like this arises, there is only one element of society that can actually make real changes to the current scenario. Neither the government, nor the political parties, nor the private companies, nor the international agencies can bring real change to Mexico without society's help. I strongly believe that it is the civil society's turn to react and to do something about this crisis. It is time for civilians to take action. In fact, Mexican society, in an effort to ameliorate the danger caused by the violence, is already very active in social media, social networks, and non-governmental organizations. "Social media is filling the gap left by the press," said Andrés Monroy-Hernández, a doctoral candidate from Mexico at the M.I.T. Media Lab. "In different regions of Mexico, both the state and the press are weak, while organized crime is becoming stronger and, in some places, replacing the state." (Cave, 2011). Mexico is in a civil war without precedent.

This is where the " Sleepy Border Town Insomniacs " come in. We are a group of people, Mexican and not Mexican, which started doing something about this problem. Because, if it is not us, then who?

CHAPTER V. THE RIO GRANDE VALLEY AND THE THEATRE

“The struggle is inner: Chicano, indio, American Indian, mojado, mexicano, immigrant Latino, Anglo in power, working class Anglo, Black, Asian--our psyches resemble the border towns and are populated by the same people. The struggle has always been inner, and is played out in outer terrains. Awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society. Nothing happens in the "real" world unless it first happens in the images in our heads.”

Gloria E. Anzaldua

What does the term collective consciousness mean? It is an expression coined in sociology by the French sociologist Émile Durkheim to refer to the shared beliefs and moral attitudes that operate as a unifying force within society. It is what people agree to be morally "right" or ethically "normal" in a society. I do believe that we, as a society, are driven by a collective set of thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes that create our own reality. But I also believe that certain shocking events in people's lives can force them to confront those beliefs and see reality from a different perspective. Shocking events can lead to awareness, and awareness leads to change. The less aware you are, the fewer inner changes you will experience, and the fewer inner changes you have, the less you want to transform your reality and therefore, your society.

Not too long ago, while still living in Monterrey, I was largely unaware of what was happening in Mexico; as with so many of my fellow Mexicans I was getting used to the everyday

violence in the streets of my country. But when my dad called me on my cell phone and said: “I don’t care what you are doing right now, I want you to leave it, drive to the house, gather a couple of changes of clothes, we are leaving the city in an hour,” it completely changed my perspective of reality. I understood that my life was about to change entirely. From that moment I no longer shared the collective consciousness of my community. Months after that happened, I read Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*, and with her arguments I realized that through this shocking experience a new awareness had propelled my mind to take a new perspective on things, a new way of thinking with no turning back. “*Una vez que ves la luz, ya no te puedes hacer el ciego*” (Once you see the light, you can no longer play the blind), my friend Leonardo used to say. Since that moment I have been called to revolution (re-evolution), a revolution with no arms, a revolution of my soul and my mind. All these things happened to occur when I moved to South Texas, the home of Gloria Anzaldúa, the Rio Grande Valley.

I first moved north of the Río Bravo (Rio Grande), to the Rio Grande Valley region (RGV), the southernmost tip of Texas, in July 2010, when my family was directly threatened by one of the Mexican cartels or criminal groups called “Los Zetas.” I have been familiar with the region all my life. A two-hour drive from my hometown, Monterrey, these Texas border towns represented a shopping paradise for the middle and upper classes of northeastern Mexico. Before the violence started to happen some families assumed that they could afford the trip to McAllen, Texas, every single weekend. Before the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was signed in 1994, the closest place where people from northeastern Mexico could find American and international products was in this strip of border towns, a set of cities located one after the other along the Rio Grande. From Rio Grande City to Brownsville, Texas, the region is made up of four counties: Starr County, Hidalgo County, Willacy County, and Cameron County. After the

1994 treaty was signed the whole region registered an exponential growth, demographically and commercially.

According to data from the Texas State Library in 1990 the total population of the Rio Grande Valley was 701,888, of which 383,545 were in Hidalgo County, 260,120 in Cameron County, 40,518 in Starr County and 17,705 in Willacy County. As of January 1, 2008, the Texas State Data Center estimated the population of the region at 1,138,872. According to the U.S Census Bureau in 2008, 86 percent of Cameron County, 90 percent of Hidalgo County, 97 percent of Starr County, and 86 percent of Willacy County were Hispanic. From 2000 to 2010 the percentage of total population growth just in the city of Mission was 69.7%, and 22% for McAllen, among the highest in the United States, and far higher than in the larger Texas cities such as Houston (7.5%) or Dallas (0.8%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).

Nowadays the growth of the Hispanic population (mainly Mexican) in the region has surged again, this time by the violence south of the river. The drug war in Mexico has obligated many Mexican families to relocate themselves, to look for a safer place to live. I'm part of this new "Diaspora," a phenomenon that my hometown people call "*La Diaspora Regia*" (*regia* from *regiomontano*, *regiomontano* means people from Monterrey). Most of the people from Monterrey that can afford moving to South Texas are very familiar to the place. As I said we use to come here all the time to shop, but the difference is that now we come to stay. In fact, South Padre Island, the paradisiacal destination twenty minutes west of Brownsville is well known to be the most famous destination for *Regiomontanos* during spring and summer vacations. The closest beach to the city of Monterrey beside South Padre Island is Playa Bagdad in Matamoros, Tamaulipas, which is characterized by its lack of tourist services and security; therefore most of

the Mexicans that hold a Visa or a Resident permit prefer to travel to Texas beaches than to those in Tamaulipas.

My family was so entrenched in this region that even before we finally moved here we had already bought a house ten years before. That house was our transient motel for so many years, but when my dad received the call demanding money in exchange of the safety of his children, our little get-a-way in Mission, Texas, became our new permanent abode. When I first moved here I was emotionally destroyed, leaving my whole life from one day to the next. I felt that I was running like a thief, or even worse running like a coward, and all that made me wonder how weak and delicate we are when it comes to our family's safety. My old life was torn apart by the instability of my country. My job, my friends, my romantic relationship, my favorite parks and movie theaters everything was taken away.

I was pushed to a corner, obligated to start all over again, and had to face a new reality, a reality in which I had to overcome my ego, my fears, "to become a man" and take this new reality as an opportunity to start all over again. When I understood that moving out like that represented a 180 degree turn in my life, I realized that this could be the opportunity that I had been waiting for, the opportunity to start doing what I had always loved the most. That day I woke up and drove to the University of Texas - Pan American, to the Department of Communication, and looked for my chance to start a career in theatre. In less than a month, in September, 2010, I was attending my first class in the Master of Arts in Theatre program: *History of Theatre* and in matter of days I had gotten a part for a main stage show at the university: the healing process had begun.

The myth of Nepantla. The United States does not end at San Antonio.

"Nothing is scarier than the blurring of the border between them and us; between the Dantesque South, and the prosperous North."

Gomez-Peña

People in United States outside the Rio Grande Valley tend to see this border region as someplace far away from everything else, even the closest cities around south Texas, Corpus Christi, San Antonio, or Austin, appear to be very far away from here. Most of the Texas cities alienate themselves from what is happening near the border. The region's reality seems to be blurry and unclear, as if we were somewhere in the middle of this two nations that meet here. Geographically, it is not Mexico, but it is not completely the United States either, we are somewhere in between. I have heard over and over again Mexican-American people from the region saying that whenever they talk to a white American citizen they are not American enough in his eyes; and when they talk to me, to their Mexican relatives, they do not seem Mexican enough to us. They are somewhere in the middle.

In the Aztecs' ancient history there was a region from which they originally came. Before founding Mexico-Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital located in what is today Mexico City, they used to live somewhere else. In the Aztec mythology, their ancestors came from the north, from a region that they called "Nepantla," and some historians believe that this region was located between Southeastern United States and North Mexico. The Mexican-American writer Gloria Anzaldúa believed that Nepantla was located specifically where the Mexico-US borderlands are today. Nepantla is more than a region, or a space; Nepantla is a word with many possible meanings. Following Keating, "Nepantla is a Nahuatl word, that signifies "in-between space."

(Keating, n.p.) Anzaldúa adopted this term, and used it to represent psychic/spiritual/material points of potential transformation. For Anzaldúa, besides a geographical region, Nepantla is also a state of mind, a capacity of oneself to place our minds in between two different realities, to handle two different worlds. "Nepantla is a place where binary thought and given ways of knowing are challenged and where potential for real transformative change can be readied and realized. Those who can achieve these states of in-between ness (*nepantleras*) can manage multiple worlds *a la vez* (simultaneously) and be facilitators of such change." (Colleen, n.p.) With Anzaldúa, I also believe that we who live in the RGV are in Nepantla. We do not know if we are located where the Aztecs' ancestors were living, but nowadays this region is composed by a bi-nature, a double nature. We cannot place ourselves completely in the United States, nor in Mexico. Spanglish, Tex-Mex music, Tex-Mex food, Mexican-Americans, whether we see it or not this is not the United States, and this double nature places us in a special position for the opening of our minds to change. We are able to observe two sides of a coin, we can switch from English to Spanish in the same sentence, we understand Mexico's pain, but we translate it and present it in an American way. We should not overlook the fact that we are a bicultural society in which things occur different from up north, and different from south of the river.

I believe that all this is important for my own personal experience and for the members of the "Sleepy Border Town Insomniacs," because the region itself marks the way we do things, the border shapes us in so many ways. We weren't able to go to perform a children's play in Mexico for security reasons, but we have to live with the stories everyday and we have family over there. Things were happening a few miles south of home, but home was safe to a certain extent. We see children playing every day in our schools, parks, and back yards, but when we crossed the river to go to Reynosa, or Matamoros, the parks were empty, some schools were

closed, and the streets looked abandoned. And still we were trying to do something. Even if we were far away from important cities of the United States, the region is politically transcendental for the country only because of the border, the border wall, immigration and commerce with Mexico. But at the same time we are at the margins, and laws are not made at the margins, laws are made by the political center. I believe this is another reason for the "Sleepy Border Town Insomniacs" to be doing all this, that we did not like the fact that most of the region's children don't get to see a stage play in Spanish, even though most of them speak Spanish in their homes as a first language. We did not like the fact that we were not doing Spanish theatre at the university and were not happy with the situation in Mexico. All these events led us to want to do something for the community and we started doing theatre even without thinking if what we were doing could be considered it Applied Drama or not.

"The Sleepy Border Town Insomniacs" was born in the RGV, and usually Applied Drama born at the margins and from the oppressed. This resonates with Nicholson, who argues "the emphasis on borders, margins and liminality in applied drama as a leitmotif for its pedagogical practices is based on the assumption that if learning shifts from the traditional centre to the radical margins, and surveys the world from the shifting vantage points of the borderlands, it will be emancipator." (Nicholson, p.46) We were at a borderland, and we were provoking changes from the margins. We started a movement of doing theatre in Spanish for a predominantly Hispanic society that did not have enough opportunity to learn about theatre arts in their own language. As Gómez-Peña says, the goal of theatre between the two sides of the border should be to "...create art together (border art is collaborative by nature)." (Gómez-Peña, 169). But that was not happening in the RGV; there were many people opposed to the fact that some group of Mexican-American students were trying to do Spanish plays, and that we wanted

to do them at our own school. Instead of joining both cultures together, it seems that the border, the line, the division, the scar, was dividing us. I found that this division has some roots specifically in our own school: The University of Texas - Pan American.

CHAPTER VI. THE THEATRE DEPARTMENT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS - PAN
AMERICAN

“You can throw away the privilege of acting, but that would be such a shame. The tribe has elected you to tell its story. You are the shaman/healer, that's what the storyteller is, and I think it's important for actors to appreciate that. Too often actors think it's all about them, when in reality it's all about the audience being able to recognize themselves in you. The more you pull away from the public, the less power you have on stage.”

Ben Kingsley

"I am a nomadic Mexican Artist/Writer in the process of *chicanization*, which means I am slowly heading north. My journey not only goes from South to North, but from Spanish to Spanglish, and then to English, from ritual art to high technology; from literature to performing arts; and from a static sense of identity to a repertoire of multiple identities" (Gómez-Peña, i). When I started reading Gómez-Peña's book *The New World Border*, I could completely identify with this first paragraph. I felt that moving to the southern border of the United States with Mexico led me to a transformation of my inner self. Not only because of the normal implications that come with moving from one place to another, from one country to another, but because of a holistic transformation that took over my thoughts, my ideas, and my perspective of the world: a new world order, or in Gómez-Peña's words: "A New World Border."

Starting my life all over again gave me the opportunity to do things I always wanted to do, and by this I mainly mean theatre. The first place I thought I could start looking for a theatrical space was the university. I wanted to continue my education, but this time in theatre.

Since I already had a Bachelors of Arts in International Affairs, I decided to go for a Masters degree in Theatre; this is where the University of Texas - Pan American falls into place.

The University of Texas Pan-American has a population of nineteen thousand students and is located twenty miles north of the Rio Grande, in the city of Edinburg, Texas. It is the most important center for higher education in South Texas (UTPA, 2011). Due to the geographical proximity and the migrant flux between northeastern Mexico and Texas, most of the students have strong ties to Mexico. In fact, according to *The Hispanic Outlook in Higher Education 2011*, "UTPA is among the top 100 best U.S. colleges for Hispanics including: 3rd in the nation in the number of bachelor's degrees, and 3rd in the number of master's degrees awarded to Hispanics" (UTPA, 2011). Therefore, UTPA has become one of the most important universities for Mexican-American students in the country. "More than 88 percent of its students are Hispanic, one of the largest enrollments of Hispanic students in the United States" (UTPA, 2011).

Despite the obvious prevalence of Latin-American students at UTPA, there was no Chicano culture flourishing in the halls of the COAS building (Communications Arts and Science Building). In fact, when I met Orquidea Morales, the president of MASC (Mexican-American Student Club), and a graduate student in the Mexican-American Studies program, I was surprised to find out that she and the members of MASC were struggling to keep that program alive. Due to the economic crisis and the educational funding budget cuts, the Mexican-American Studies program was about to get cut, and Orquidea and a few groups of students were fighting to save it. More surprising was the fact that the program did not have many students.

I have to confess that when I started the Masters program I was expecting to find something different. I was used to hearing about how universities in the State of California were full of Chicano students, who were proud to be Mexican-American, to be *Latino*, *Meztizo*, *Pocho*, and *Hispano*. I was expecting to encounter theatergoers steeped in the Chicano culture, a border culture, people like Gloria Anzaldúa, Luis Valdez, or Guillermo Gomez-Peña. Instead, I found a group of Mexican-American students trying mainly to do mainstream American theatre. I mostly found followers of Shakespeare, Tennessee Williams or Neil Simon, students trying to be Anglo or Euro-American actors. They reminded me of one of Gomez-Peña's theatre manifestos called "There used to be a Mexican in this body." In which concerns the future of Mexico and the transformation of its culture through the dominance of the American culture. "Given the exponential increase of American trash and media culture in Mexico, what will happen to our indigenous traditions, our social and cultural rituals, our language, and national psyche? Will Mexico's future generations become hyphenated Mexican-Americans, brown-skinned gringos, or Canochis (upside-down Chicanos)?" (Gomez-Pena, 8) I thought maybe because the RGV population is not as large as those of the major cities in California, Latino people here in the Valley were not as conscious of their own roots, or were more easily influenced by the American mainstream culture. Most of the students were not interested in doing Mexican or Latino plays, they were just following the way the theatre program was constructed, they were just responding to whatever options presented themselves. But there was a group of students inside the department that wanted to do plays in Spanish, or plays with a more Hispanic or Latino influence. Most of them found in the children's show *La Lente Maravillosa* an opportunity to start exploring how it would be to work on plays outside American mainstream theatre.

We have to understand that if the theatre program did not have a flourishing Chicano culture, it is because when it was first created approximately 80 years ago, it was the only program in its kind in the region. Therefore, the first plays they started doing were mainly Anglo-American or European mainstream. That is why the program did not commonly do plays in Spanish or plays with an Hispanic theme on the main stage. As I mentioned, apparently the program is based mainly on American and European mainstream theatre. I could not believe that a university with a eighty-nine percent Hispanic student population was not doing many plays about Hispanics. I decided to do research on the productions the theatre program had staged, and I found that since eleven years ago, only 10 out of 97 plays (main stage and non main stage) presented by the university had something to do with Latinos or Hispanics, and even more surprising is the fact that out of those ten only five talk specifically about Mexican-Americans or Mexicans. The Department of Communication was not running a theatre that most of the student population can relate to culturally. Most of the authors were European or Anglo-American, eighty seven out of the total, which represents the 89.6% of the productions.

These numbers could be very surprising, but when it comes to a theatre program in an American university, we have to understand that a certain balance between different kinds of theatre must be allowed. Comparing the Hispanic plays to those that were from the American or European mainstream theatre, the percentage of difference seems very high, but when we break up the mainstream shows in subcategories like Greek plays, Shakespearean, Contemporary theatre, or other classifications we will find a bit more balance. Besides, getting the Hispanic or Latino influence to grow inside the theatre program, it has to be demanded from the students that compose the program, an ongoing process of change, and it has to come from the students in order for the university to support them.

But even with the lack of *Chicanismo* at the university, or the scarcity of Hispanic plays in the theatre program, I was not entirely disappointed; during my graduate studies, I was able to get acquainted with theatre history, from the Greeks to contemporary drama, and it was then that I began to realize a pattern in my likes and dislikes of certain types of works from various theatre authors. Greek drama taught me about Euripides, whom I consider the first social reformer in theatre history, an author ahead of his time who would use the theatre for change, and his works grabbed my attention. Then I had the opportunity to read *Poetics* from Aristotle and I realized that in summary it was a work that explains how to maintain mainstream theatre, therefore helping preserve the status quo. It was then that I decided to separate myself from traditional theatre and started identifying authors who had found in theatre a way to promote social change. Moliere and his social critics through satire, Ibsen and the beginning of realism in theatre, and in the end I stumbled upon the works of Grotowski and Brecht and their revolutionary theories about how we can study theater's effects on the audience. These last two authors led me to Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*. My graduate studies in theatre were paying back, and the situation I came from led me to focus on the type of theatre people do to heal, to overcome crises, to prompt critical thinking on certain aspects of society and to look for a solution. I was immersed in all these theories of theatre for change, for development, for education; that was when I became part of "The Sleepy Border Town Insomniacs."

I met a group of people that shared my desire to tell the world what was going on south of the border. They were working on an experimental play called *Crawling with Monsters*, a multimedia, documentary performance piece that depicted the largely unreported, war-like conditions in northeastern Mexico. As I mentioned at the beginning of this work, this play addressed the effects of the regional violence on children and the people around them. Most of

the people from this group were students and former students from the theatre program at UTPA, and most of them were from Mexico or came from a Mexican origin. The curious part about this group is that at that moment, most of them were not getting main roles at the university productions. So they decide to audition for the Spanish children play that Dr. Wiley was working in. That is how the *Sleepy Border Town Insomniacs* was born.

CHAPTER VII. CRAWLING WITH MONSTERS, THE EMPOWERMENT EFFECT.

*“Art is not merely contemplation, it is also action,
and all action changes the world, at least a little,”*

Tony Kushner

Our aim was to change the world? Probably not, but we were aiming to change our World, at least a little. When Dr. Eric Wiley gathered all the cast in room 161 of the COAS building, he talked to us about the possible risks we were taking in doing a play about the violence in Mexico so close to the border. We talked about the mass murders; the atrocious killings of innocents, mutilations, rapes, we all shared our own stories. We talked about people we knew, people somebody else knew, neighbors, relatives, friends, or acquaintances; we all have somebody who was part of the statistics of these depressing events.

In that classroom Dr. Wiley showed us videos, pictures, news articles and all the information he had gathered about the drug war. The subject was not something you can just work with; we needed to reach certain agreements. We all decided that once we have the play ready, we wouldn't perform to public audiences near the border nor in any city in the state of Texas, we also agreed not to post anything on the social networks about this project, including Facebook and Twitter. We could only share what we were doing with our family and very close friends; we called this venture "The secret project". We all knew that some of the drug dealers live among us. Most of them send their families to live to the United States for their own safety. In fact, we got a couple of stories related to sons of drug dealers in schools in South Texas; we

did not want to even talk about those stories as part of the project. The risks of talking about drug dealers who live among us would have been very high. Even in cities around McAllen some people have died in gunfights, pretty much related to the same drug war that is taking place south of the border. I personally live two miles north of the river and I have seen countless times the Border Patrol agents arresting people from Mexico that cross the border illegally either to look for a better life or to smuggle drugs and arms.

We were aware that the project leads us into certain kind of danger. But still, we stayed there. Once we analyzed the risks we were taking by doing this play Dr. Wiley asked if we still were interested in continuing with the project. Everybody agreed. I must mention that the degree to which we were related to Mexico varied. Some of us just came from there, born and raised, some others have relatives there but they were born in Texas, some were brought to the States when they were little and hardly remember what it was living over there, and some others barely cross the border. But in a way we were all related to Mexico, most of us have a Mexican origin, and the ones who were American share with us a "border culture," they have their life surrounded by Mexicans, by the language and traditions of Mexican-Americans. As we saw in the chapter about the Rio Grande Valley, this region is a blurry bi-cultural community. Therefore, everybody felt committed to it, all of us were touched by what was going on in Mexico and we felt committed not only because of our geographical location, we were also annoyed by the fact that we could not perform at the festivals in Reynosa and Matamoros, and even worse, we were mad at the fact that the children of these Mexican cities were not getting to see our play, and probably any other play. As theatre students we understand the vital importance to have an education in the arts, and these kids were in danger of growing without it. That was one of the main reasons we finally decided to get involved. We could not leave things like that,

that we needed to do something. We knew that we were taking some risks but we couldn't afford being in silence anymore.

Dr. Wiley mentioned that participating in this project would not only imply some obvious external risks, but furthermore it could affect us emotionally. In Boone and Plastow's book, *Theatre and Empowerment. Community Drama on the World Stage*, the authors explore the consequences for a theatre artist of being involved in the process of empowerment through theatre: "those of us involved in theatre that seeks to empower are often aware that even from the inside it is not always safe. When people start to explore and test their histories, their experiences, their beliefs and their emotions, they can become very vulnerable." (Boone, Plastow, 10) We were ready to be affected. We balance the good and the bad things, and even if we were aware of the risky nature of *Crawling with Monsters* we supported the project.

In this chapter I am going to talk about the possible empowerment effect of the play on its participants. I am going to analyze how through the planning, construction, development and, finally the execution of *Crawling with Monsters* we could encounter change, change that pushed the "Sleepy Border Town Insomniacs" to continue working in the field, change that made its participants want to do something more about a terrible situation, mainly through theatre and the arts. For this study I made three interviews one hour length with some of the actors when we were doing and preparing the play, the way they talked about the project, the ideas they shared and overall the actions they took individually will lead this research to an open analysis to see if this project aided the participants to experience actual change. Through the development of this chapter I will touch base on the questions I made, analyze their answers and support my conclusions with Applied Drama theories, the discipline in which *Crawling with Monsters* could

be fitted, at the same time I will analyze the actors responses through Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* theory.

A special note has to be added before reading the work of this chapter. Due to the subjective nature of my claim, the results and levels of affectedness of the participating students vary. The main purpose of this study is not to give specific results, or quantitative statistics, but to explore through the “Applied Drama” theories the scope and aims of the play concerning the growth of their participants.

First of all, I do want to mention that we did not plan to be transformed through this project. In fact, we were not aware that transformation can be reached through it, but we changed during the process. Exploring what was going on in Mexico, traveling there to interview people, hearing them talk to a voice recorder or camera, made us discover different perspectives on the matter. We got involved with them, we heard them and through the interviews we felt their anxieties, fears, and emotions. As Nicholson states, “drama is a good way for people to extend their horizons of experience, recognizing how their own identities have been shaped and formulated and, by playing new roles and inhabiting different subject positions, finding different points of identification with others.” (Nicholson, 21) That is exactly what happened through working in this play. As an actor, when you play a role, you study the character that the writer made up for the story. It's a fictional character, probably based on different aspects of real people whom the writer knew. But when you are working with real people, the actor study work is totally different; you are dealing with something that you know is one hundred percent real, there is no writer's imagination playing a role in it. You have to be sincere and authentic with the character you are portraying because you have to respect the source. But at the same time you are sharing with them, you are able to feel what they felt, and in a way have a better understanding

of their position, being able to identify or relate yourself with them to the point that you ended up growing in perspective.

But we grew even if that was not our first aim. Our first intention was to communicate, to research and became well informed about the drug war in Mexico. We could not believe how terrible things were occurring in our neighboring country, and our society behaved as if nothing were happening. As we read in the chapter about Mexico and the drug violence, the Mexican media was omitting a lot of facts and information because the reporters were endangered, the official position of the Mexican government was to be silent, as if nothing were really happening, and in general people were afraid to talk. Therefore, if nobody was actually speaking up, we felt that at least through theatre we could get their voices heard, we could share what we knew and let the world know about it; We constantly repeated to ourselves: "you never know who is going to be listening." In this sense, one of the responses I got from the interviews caught my attention. When I asked Gloria Hamill, one of my fellow actors about changing people's perspectives through the play, she said: "This is what we are doing in real life; we are literally teaching people what is going on. Things that they turn their ears and their eyes away from. You know? We get in their faces and tell them, we tell them: listen this is happening, and it's true." That is what we are doing through *Crawling with Monsters*, spreading the word. As Nicholson states, we knew that "theatre offered an immediate and visible platform for public debate and for the performance of protest, and it was thought to be powerful way to reach the hearts and minds of its intended audiences." (Nicholson, 9) That is why we choose to do a theatre play/documentary as a vehicle to pursuit social awareness. In addition, we were all theatre people, and we were all already doing theatre for children in Spanish. Through working with children, we learned that theatre could be a powerful approach to convey a message.

Overall, we can say that we wanted to change the world by sharing knowledge. We wanted to communicate a message through theatre. It is very well known that this is the way theatre had served society for centuries, theatre is a way of establish communication, a way to share knowledge and create social capital, the mere interaction between actors and audiences produces knowledge. The theatrical space, whether is mainstream or not, is a space in which a story is presented, the audiences listen and see, but more important, they think and create their own perspective on the matter the play is presenting. Nicholson affirms, “as a practice, it is generally understood that knowledge in drama is embodied, culturally located and socially distributed. This means that knowledge is produced through interaction with others, and that this reciprocity between participants generates new forms of social and cultural capital.” (Nicholson, p.39). We were generating a flow of information. When we went to perform in venues in New Orleans, Chicago or New York, we noticed that most of the people out there were totally unaware of the matter, Mexico's Drug War felt like something really far away from their home, and the issue seemed irrelevant to them. But when they listened to our stories, the audience's perspective on the subject automatically changed. Then is when I realized that theatre could matter, that theatre could actually reach social change. During their studies about different communities doing theatre around the world, the theatre theorist Boon and Plastow conclude that “Theatre, in a variety of forms and contexts, can make, and indeed has made, positive political and social interventions in a range of developing cultures across the world” (Boon, Plastow, Introduction, 1).

We were informing our audiences what was going on in Mexico, but meanwhile the people involved in the project also developed a better understanding of the Mexican situation through the play. Applied Drama has strong ties to education; it helps people not only to transmit

certain message, but also provides them with knowledge. Being involved in a creative process for an artistic project is an educational experience by itself. Now imagine what it meant to the participants to be in a project that includes social claims and works with a real life struggle that is close to home. That's why this project empowers its participants, not only while they were constructing and working on the play, but also when they performed. The actor/participants were sharing on levels they had not foreseen; through the preparation of the play, the director, the cast and the crew worked together in all types of assignments which led them to an interaction who goes beyond any mainstream or university play. First, we went in search of the interviewees, collecting the stories, facts, quotes, videos, and other material that help put the story together. The actors help to translate and edit the interviews we had from Spanish to English, and in that way they were helping the director to complete the script. Finally, when the director has the draft of the script, the actors began to work with it. But that does not mean that the process was complete, as the events in Mexico continued to happen and while the actors were rehearsing the director kept adding more parts to the script. It is an ongoing project that evolves as reality changes.

Crawling with Monsters was in constant development, it was a project always growing in one sense or another, because the situation it talks about is still alive; the project changes as the situation evolves. First, we got accepted into New Orleans and that experience served as a preparation for what was going to happen later. As we mentioned before, Dr. Wiley and his contacts managed to take the play to the AATE national conference in Chicago, and to the NYC International Fringe Festival. These experiences helped the company spread the effects of the Mexican drug war in different venues in the United States; we made the voices of the people heard. But again, it seems that more than that; the people involved in the project were growing,

more and more on a personal level. The ones who originally were less aware of the situation, by the time we went to Chicago, knew a lot more, and the ones who were more affected by the situation became leaders in the group, always helping others to remember the importance of what we were doing. Being able to all this through theatre was an enriching experience; each and all of us experienced the power of drama. Before going to New York City I had the chance to talk to most of my fellow actors, and their responses regarding the projects and its effects were very similar. Two common denominators among all the responses (a) was that we had learned more about the situation in Mexico through the play and we were more aware of what was happening, and (b) that the play touched us in a way no other theatre project had before.

A lot of good things could be said about the experience of being part of this project, but that does not mean that it was an easy journey. Tension was a common denominator during rehearsals. The subject of the play itself brings anxiety and stress to its participants. Some of us were too related to Mexico that made it hard for us to understand how some people could show a certain distance from the conflict. At the same time, those who were not that related, but still were part of the play; do not always understand why some of us were too affected by it. As we mentioned before, this type of theatre can bring vulnerability, and that exposure was constantly shown through the conflicts and disagreements of the people involved. The topic was not easy to handle, and commonly it was treated very carefully. Some of the relatives and friends of the actors were part of the interviewees, and everyone showed respect for all the material the director gave us.

Beside the tension that the nature of the project caused, each of us had their own reasons for participating in *Crawling with Monsters*. Some of us were interested in the project because we were directly affected by the drug war in México; others testified to the consequences of the

situation on their families or friends. But there were also some others “less” affected who participated because they were already involved in the Spanish children show, or because they were cast for the project later on. Regardless of the background of all of the people involved, we can say that an amalgamation started to happen. The group seemed to get closer and closer with the time. The stories made the people involved in bond in a very special way. We still had our differences, but we realized that the play we were doing was an experience that had something special and powerful in its nature.

As I mentioned before, the project had an empowering effect on the group, and that effect can be seen in the way they performed. I mentioned that through theatre the actors of a play work on a character or characters, and develop a new persona, an interpretation of what the actor and the director develop together. But in *Crawling with Monsters* the development of the characters differed from the usual process. By playing new roles, and speaking for real people, the actors could identify a lot more with the “characters” because you are in direct connection with the source. The people they were interpreting, in a way was so close to them that the actors ended up identifying themselves powerfully with their characters. The situation in Mexico was too close to the participants home, and some of them even used to live in Mexico, so this came to play a role in the construction of the characters as well. We found similitude, points of equality with the interviewees. The actors felt that in a way, interpreting real people close to their lives made them feel more related to the actual characters. “The idea that drama can take people beyond themselves and into the world of others is deeply rooted in the values of applied drama, and this chimes particularly well with a vision of social citizenship as a collective and communitarian undertaking.” (Nicholson, 24) We felt that sense of collectiveness.

The project *Crawling with Monsters* is a great example of what can be done with the power of theatre. Further qualitative research needs to be done, in order to analyze deeply the full effects of the play on its participants, but so far we can establish that this play transformed them in a way no other play has done. Just the whole process of putting the play together, the participation of the actors in the whole research and data collection, invited them engage in the project in a different way. All of the people involved were more implicated in the creation and execution of the project; they felt a social commitment and the sense that they had the obligation to make the voices of the people suffering in Mexico heard. “In applied drama, processes of working are embodied and involved rather than passive and detached, as participants are invited to engage physically and emotionally with the work. (Nicholson, 10) I believe that theatre offers a direct and open space for public debate and the performance of protest; it can take people’s arguments and discuss them through the process of drama. That’s why theatre has a powerful way to reach the hearts and minds of its intended audiences. (Nicholson, 9) *Crawling with Monsters* for sure used this power to reach the feelings of its audiences but, even more, to change the people involved in it in a way that they had never experienced before, also through the power of theatre. *Crawling with Monsters* gave them empowerment, and gave them the opportunity to contribute to their community.

When we came back from New York City, Adilene, one of the actors who use to live in Matamoros, Tamaulipas contacted me through the phone; we were talking about the situation in Mexico, and how it is getting worse. “We should do something about this,” she said. I realized that it was not simply about the play anymore; the project was still alive, we were still working in the play, but Adilene was trying to go further than it: she was wanting to take concrete action, to start a civil or not-profit organization. In fact, Adilene actually asked me for help to translate

from English to Spanish some of her writing regarding her position towards the violence. She was no longer performing, as Boal states, her dramatic action “throws light upon real action”. “The spectacle is a preparation for action”. (Boal, 155). And Adilene, consciously or unconsciously, through the play had been preparing for action.

This process can be considered part of the transformation I was mentioning. The actors learned people's stories and felt in their own interpretation what other people had experienced, and through this they change. In a play like this, a traditional dramatic interpretation is not enough. Because the lines of the script were mostly comprised of real stories, the actors were not only interpreting, but also making the feelings and emotions their own. This very process is what provokes the empowerment effect. “Empowerment is to do not with the amelioration of oppression and poverty per se, but with the liberation of the human mind and spirit, and with the transformation of participants.” (Boon, Plastow, 7) Not only as an actor, but also as a human being I felt this liberation through their stories. I felt the power of those people speaking, and I made their stories my own. In my experience it was hard to differentiate between the feelings of the interviewees and my own.

These empowerment effects transformed the way I perceived theatre, and it gave me a whole new perspective about it. I started to study more about the type of theatre we were involved with. It was then when I discovered “Applied Drama”, and subsequently crashed into Augusto Boal and the *Theater of the Oppressed*. When I took the class Theatre Research, as part of my graduate studies, I had the idea of researching in theatre near the border, or theatre about the border. The topic was too broad. I experienced a hard time defining what I wanted to research. All of a sudden I discovered that the play I was involved in was exactly what I wanted

to study from the beginning. It was not exactly the “border” concept that kept my attention, but the fact that we were doing theatre for a reason beyond entertainment. It happened to be that the play I was in was near the border, and of course the Mexican-American border has its role in all this experience. But, mainly my interest lies in the power of drama to help society develop and promote human growth. During the next section I will begin to share my own personal experiences and to explain how being part of *Crawling with Monsters* affected me. The next paragraphs are very personal, but at the same time helpful in understanding where I came from and how this project helped me to understand the power of the theatre.

Crawling with Monsters, the personal journey.

Like most of the afternoons in northeastern Mexico during spring, the day was hot and burning in the middle of May. I was standing outside a RadioShack trying to figure out how to use the recording device I had just bought. I drove the one hundred and fifty miles south of the Rio Grande River, from the University of Texas - Pan American to my hometown of Monterrey in Nuevo León, Mexico. It was the first time I had ever used a handheld recorder and honestly I didn't know how to use it at that time or if I was going to be able to get the benefit I needed from it. I never thought that the research classes that I took during my bachelor studies would be beneficial for my future theatre career. I had a Bachelor of Arts in International Affairs, but my real interest has always been in the theatre; my goal has always been to become a professional actor and to participate in major productions around the world. But there I was, with my handheld recorder in one hand and my video camera in the other; in my backpack I was carrying a notebook and some other “research equipment.”

I was born and raised in that same city: Monterrey, Nuevo León, a northeastern city two hours south of the Mexican border with Texas. Monterrey is considered the industrial capital of México and with its estimated five million inhabitants it is the third largest city in the country. As I mentioned during the introduction, during the summer of 2010 my family and I had to relocate from our home and move to the U.S. because of the latest and increasing episodes of violence caused by the recent drug war battles in Mexico. Due to the scarce press coverage of the “situation,” most outsiders do not really believe what is going on over there, but from my own experience I can tell you that we fled from a city in war-like conditions, where everyday people both innocent and related to the drug business died on the streets.

After moving to the U.S. I entered a turning phase in my life during which I decided to start studying theatre. Before I had focused my professional career on political affairs, but the tough situation that my family and I had to endure opened my senses and made me feel that I was ready to finally work on what I always loved the most: the theatre. Being in situations of life or death make you say “if not now, when?” That’s why I finally decided to enter the theatre program at University of Texas - Pan American. I met Dr. Eric Wiley, the director of the program and founder of the “Sleepy Border Town Insomniacs”, the theatre company was working in children theatre along the border. The play that they were doing was *La Lente Maravillosa*, by Emilio Carballido. It was about microbes that end up turning into monsters that crawl into the audience.

I started working on *Crawling with Monsters* last year. Just after they were doing the children play my professor/director invited me to participate as part of the cast and crew. At the beginning I was invited as an actor, but suddenly I found myself working for this project in so many ways. The nature of the project itself asked its participants to be more active and to go

beyond a regular actors work. *Crawling with Monsters* was a play based on reality, and its participants were asked to help reaching the facts and data about the Mexican drug war, and to gather stories of their families or friends south of the river.

As a theatre person, I was involved in diverse productions since I was a child. Doing theatre was part of my life, and I have been involved in at least one theatre project each year since I was fifteen. But *Crawling with Monsters* was by far the theatre piece that made me work the hardest, that invited me to involve myself not only in the construction of a character, but in the whole process of the creation of the entire play. As I mentioned the project asked for people to be committed not only as actors, but as researchers, journalists, translators from Spanish to English, editors, audio and video recorders/editors. This project made me feel active not only as an artist, but also as an activist. That very sense of activism initiated the experience that made me grow. We were doing the play for the kids that weren't able to see our children's show, we were working for the people, and to take their stories to audiences far away, we were planning to take the play to a Festival in New Orleans and from there explore more options see what happens. But we didn't notice that at the same time we were working for others, the play was changing us too. Applied Drama is well known for being a type of theatre that not only reach the audience through certain message, but make their participants grew with the journey. "It is hard to say whether a community play exists more for the benefit of the audience who will come to see it, or for the community which explores itself while creating it." (Boone, Plastow, 40) We were receiving benefits that we didn't ask for; we were growing in a way we didn't expect.

That was when I discovered that being a participant in this project was going to require more from me. It's commonly known that applied theater is a kind of theatre that always requires its contributors to go beyond the histrionic process of creating a character and rehearsing for a

play with their fellow actors. In applied theatre there is a process in which the actor not only is involved in the project as an artist, but to a certain degree is also involved in the whole process of the construction of the play; we became researchers, psychologists, and investigators. That process itself gave the actor/participant a sense of growth with the project, and once more we can call that growth part of the empowerment effect. As Boon and Plastow argues in their book *Theatre and Empowerment* “If Tfd (Theater for Development) and its related forms are always in a real sense ‘works in progress’, then, for the practitioners involved, it is also true that the self, too, is a work in progress, and this casts a particular light on our understanding of what we mean by ‘empowerment’. (Boon, Plastow, Introduction, 5) The constant “work in progress” is precisely what helps the participants to have an acculturation of the topic they are handling, as well as grow in perspective and horizons.

In the same book, Plastow argues “Theatre, in a variety of forms and contexts, can make, and indeed has made, positive political and social interventions in a range of developing cultures across the world” (Boon, Plastow, Introduction, 1). Theatre helps to raise awareness in the individuals who are participating in it, as well as in those who are witnesses of the process, the audiences. Usually actor preparation includes a research on the basic topics regarding the play in which he or she is working. This research could lead to a whole new discovery not only about facts or data of the play itself, but can lead to an inner learning process, in which the actor gets to grow as a human being. “It is also evident that, in many cases, engagement in performance practice which has sought in one way or another to transform the lives of individuals and their communities has also had the effect of transforming the lives of those leading that work.” (Boon, Plastow, Introduction, 5) In my own experience *Crawling with Monsters* changed forever the

way I experience the theatre. Now I know that through drama I can reach even more and the effects of the drama on the people cannot be underestimated.

Crawling with Monsters. The Interviews

After an analysis of different aspects of the play and how we can study it through the theory of Applied Drama, it is important to hear what other people involved in the project think about it. During this section, the main core is to analyze the thoughts of the people involved in the project in a direct form. The interview is a qualitative research tool that helped us construct this project; *Crawling with Monsters* would never have been possible if not for the interviews we made to the people of Northeast Mexico. Therefore I decided to explore the use of this same tool but with the students that made the interviews and helped with this project. I interviewed three out of eighteen students that were participating in the show, their names are: Gloria Hamill, Adilene Olvera and Luis Moreno. As we did for the show, I interview them in public places, using the same recorder I used to make my interviews on the violence. The interviews were composed of fifteen questions but for the matter of this research we will analyze four of them.

The first question I would like to analyze deals with a description of the project in the actor's words, I asked the actors to tell me in few words, what is *Crawling with Monsters*? These are the responses I obtained.

Gloria Hamill: "C.W.M. it's a group of students that in the end were messengers of what the trouble is in Mexico, all the violence."

Adilene Olvera: "A theater piece/documentary where true events from the drug war in Mexico are depicted in a play."

Luis Moreno: "C.W.M. is a social political show about the violence that is happening here in the Valley or in Mexico, I mean, everywhere around the border area."

We can say that all of them share the same idea of what the show is about, in their own words they mentioned the drug war and the violence in Mexico, and how through theatre we depicted or were the messengers of what is going on. This first question it's important in the sense that we can see that all our interviewees were in agreement on the subject we are talking about.

The second question I would like to analyze is about how this project differentiates itself from other shows, what was the difference between this and other theatre projects they have been in, I asked them, "What makes their work on this show different from their work on other shows?"

Gloria Hamill: "On the other shows it's all about entertaining people, it's all about becoming a character all for the sake of entertainment maybe you can still teach a lesson or show them something, or make them feel stuff, but this at the beginning I thought that it was a show, but it changed.

It is not a show, like I said it's a vehicle, it's a way of showing people what other people are going through so ah what makes this different. It's different because I'm actually ah, I think I am going to make a difference in a way, I'm changing people's attitudes about Mexico, their opinions, maybe they were just ignoring the situation, now I think that maybe they want to feel, maybe they feeling that they want to do something, so that's what is different."

Adilene Olvera: "I didn't really have other plays that I remembered that have left such a learning experience within myself, it's very different this is true life events, this is real, and it just make that very different."

Luis Moreno: "This show is different because it does not have a narrative style or even the need to create characters, and because of that is a lot more visceral, because of the fact that we are dealing with real people, real interviews from people, and it is a

combination of both, more pressure, because you want to evoke a sense of truth as opposed to acting."

In the analysis of this question we can say that the fact that the play is based on real life events plays a key role. When a performer is dealing with a script that is based in reality the way he or she behaves is completely different. As I mentioned before, there is a certain necessity to convey the truth as it is, there is no longer an objective to entertain through the play. The main goal is to portray what is really happening, and all of a sudden this becomes your only goal: to share other people experiences. It is no longer about getting a story with a beautiful or tragic ending, it's about getting the words out, getting a reaction from the audience. And it is precisely this reaction that it matters, and for purposes of analysis of this question, I am going to rely on my analysis of Boal's theories regarding audience's actions and reactions.

In Boal's book, *Theatre of the Oppressed* he describes how theatre may be used as a "weapon" to do good or bad in society reached through the transformation of the spectator into a more active individual, what Boal calls the "spect-actor". For Boal, the spectator must not exist as a mere witness. In order for a real change to take place, the spectator must be altered not only on the plane of the mind, but on the plane of actions. After every show we presented we had space for questions, a "talk" with the audience, getting their reactions, their feedback. This was not based in Boal's Forum Theatre or we did not really intended to do anything Boalian through this. As I mentioned, we were doing things our way without planning or structuring them based on an specific theory. But it seems that what it happened to us can be related to Boal's own ideas in theatre. We were dealing with reality and we were sharing that reality with our audiences.

For Boal, "Theater is action," and one must be part of the action in order to suffer a real transformation. As the theatre theorist Tony Kushner said "Art is not merely contemplation, it is also action, and all action changes the world, at least a little." Without action there is not a real change. To revolutionize the public, the actor must take the audience to the level of actions. Boal's "Forum Theatre is a reflection on reality and a rehearsal for future action. In the present, we re-live the past to create the future." (Boal, 9) We were re-living peoples experiences, as Luis Moreno said, the show was more visceral because we were dealing with people's reality, we took their past, revived in the present to create the future.

We were not working with audiences at a consciousness level, we were trying to get further, we were confronting them, we got them the time to ask us questions about the situation and how we felt, and even more to propose something to help us find a solution together. Unlike Brecht, Boal states that theatre experience "is revealing not only on the level of consciousness, but also globally on the level of the action." (Boal, 155) In order to create concrete changes in the people, the people have to be taken to action. For Boal, all the actions that happened on stage are called "dramatic action". These actions become real actions, leading the spectator into an activism. The spectator now is the actor. The more one participate activity in the theatrical journey the more one suffer revelations regarding the matter one is working with. And that is precisely what happened to us during *Crawling with Monsters*; we went on doing the play one show to another, and which each time we discovered new things in ourselves that we do not even know we were capable of. And this leads me to the third question I want to analyze: "Has your sense of the role of theatre changed at all during the course of the festivals run?"

Gloria Hamill: "Yes because at first like I said, I thought that it was just all about show business and stuff, but now I think, no I believe now that we can change, you know that

we can bring change through theater, and before I kind of thought is... it becomes about you, you know? Now I realize well it can still be about you in other shows, but theater also has another sideways, can bring humanity closer, you know you can be a tool in the theater and theater can be a tool itself too, you know portray things that are happening around the world and bring it to your face, to home."

Adilene Olvera: "Yeah definitely, more than entertaining, is trying to communicate something. Before to me theater was just like "wow! I want to get entertain, but now to me theater it can be various things from trying to communicate something very important."

Luis Moreno: "Yes a lot is a, before this my main road I wanted to take was acting, and after this, after talking to you a lot and Dr.Wiley I kind of got interested in Applied Theatre and also directing and writing specially is one of the things I want to do, writing for social change to send messages."

During *Crawling with Monsters*, we transform ourselves from spectators into actors. We have been watching the news on the war on drugs, the Mexican drug war, or the cartel's war, but we were only that, spectators. For years, the situation has spread all over our region, affecting our families, and changing our way of life. In fact, some of us were forced to move due to the precarious conditions that we were living in some parts of Mexico. We were affected, but still most of us weren't doing anything regarding the issue, we were just witnesses, we were just audiences. But through the play, now we are not only simple observers we are activists, we are taking action towards what is happening, we take our part in this problematic. By participating in a play talking about violence, we become part of the problem and the solution itself. We are sharing reality with everything that was there before us by taking action on it. Through dramatic action we jumped into the pool of what is going on regarding the drug war in Mexico. One of my principal statements is that "all theater is necessarily political." (Boal, II) We did not plan it, but the play became a political issue, a political weapon. Not because is changing

society itself, but because is changing people from the play, who also have a role in society. And is precisely this how this role change what I touch base on the next question. I asked them: "How can you represent in actions your changes, and what is that you do different from before?"

Gloria Hamill: "I think I will pursuit further (a career in theatre) I just don't know how, I do belong to a church and the church also in its ways you know, they need theater I think, theater will be a great way to show people how to love, to teach people instead of just standing in the pulpit and yelling them the sermon. Now I starting to think, wow I can use theater and bring the stories for the bible and come to life and even if is not just from the bible just teaching people how to love, teaching kids how to be nice to each other."

Adilene Olvera: "Yes I respected a lot more, when I started I was naive, theatre was more like you know "I want to act and its awesome", but now I respect it."

Luis Moreno: "Whenever I see shows, I look at actors and I look at their actions, and I wonder what make them do this, and are they doing it right? What can they do more, to see or to show the audience what they're trying to represent."

We can state that our first impression on these responses is that there is a change in the way of thinking of these interviewees about theatre. They respected the theatre more, they analyzed more what they are doing when it comes to theatre, and they are finding possible paths to use theatre in other aspects of their life. They focused more on the audience and what they can do for other people, more than the individual experience of performing and that is precisely the core of Applied Drama, the use of Theatre for a greater purpose. As I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter is not the objective of this study to use social theory to get a quantitative response in whether or not the people in the project reach change, but with a brief analysis of people responses to questions on the play, plus the actual facts and characteristics of the project itself we can conclude that the empowerment effect of *Crawling with Monsters* is undeniable. "Empowerment is to do not with the amelioration of oppression and poverty per se, but with the liberation of the human mind and spirit, and with the transformation of it participants. (Boon,

Plastow p.7). Beside the conclusions of the analysis of these questions, during the next chapter we will talk about the current activities of former and actual *Crawling with Monsters* participants, in order to see if the project actually ended up taking the people involved to actions.

Crawling with Monsters participants got engaged in the project in so many ways, not only the time that they had to put on the show to get it ready, but the hours of research, the debates, discussions, disagreements, travels, sharing experiences. All these facts make the group grow stronger, and that process ended with a real outcome of change and empowerment. As Boon and Plastow affirm "It is evident that, in many cases, engagement in performance practice which has sought in one way or another to transform the lives of individuals and their communities has also had the effect of transforming the lives of those leading that work." (Boon, Plastow, Introduction, 5) Our lives got transformed more than anything else, we sure spread the word about Mexico's Drug War, but more than that we grew in awareness and consciousness, and that was *Crawling with Monsters* real outcome.

CHAPTER VIII. CONCLUSIONS

“Theatre is a form of knowledge; it should and can also be a means of transforming society. Theatre can help us build our future, rather than just waiting for it.”

Augusto Boal

The "Sleepy Border Town Insomniacs" are still out there. After going to New Orleans, during the spring of 2011, we formed a student association called *The Latino Theatre Initiatives* of which one of my interviewees, Luis Moreno, is vice-president. Gloria Hamill and Adilene Olvera were also officials of it, but they graduated from the school in the Fall of 2011. They are currently around, voluntarily working and cooperating with our projects. Adilene Olvera recently went to help in *Crawling with Monsters* performance at the Luminaria Arts Festival in San Antonio, Texas, on May 5, 2012 and Gloria Hamill has helped us out with different projects, mainly working with Dr. Wiley on a book, which he is planning to publish about the interviews we used for *Crawling with Monsters*.

We decided to form *The Latino Theatre Initiatives* as the formal side of "The Sleepy Border Town Insomniacs." As we grew, we wanted to institutionalize our progress. We noticed that after New Orleans we were getting more people involved who wanted to work with us, then after Chicago and New York even more people become interested. Students began getting involved and we decided to give the group an official form. We also discovered that we could grow in greater ways with the support of the university. Now that we have become large, we

have the means to actually get into agreements with the Department of Communication and work directly with our faculty. Furthermore, other professors of the department and faculty members became supporters of our initiative.

Benjamin Bennet, in his book "All Theatre is Revolutionary Theatre," states that "the theatre as an institution does not generally arise and operate for any sustained period without being at least tolerated, if not actually promoted, by a structure of relatively stable social and political institution" (Bennett 2005, 3). That is one of the reasons why we decided to form the student association and concluded that if after *Crawling with Monsters* we would not have created *The Latino Theatre Initiatives*, our objective of using and celebrating the Spanish language and Mexican-American culture through theatre in South Texas would have been less easily met. Even if we started these projects mainly by ourselves, the support of the University of Texas - Pan American and the Department of Communication has become involved in the development of the group and its projects.

From the beginning, and mainly through Dr. Wiley's idea of doing a play off campus, we chose to make our voices heard. We wanted a Department of Communication that includes more of our own Latino culture, our *Chicanismo*, *nuestra Mexicanidad*, and have been working hard for it. We have a lot of work to do yet, but we started choosing our own stories rather than just doing what was offer to us by the faculty. As Nicholson argues, "drama provides a powerful opportunity to ask questions about whose stories have been customarily told, whose have been accepted as truth, and to redress the balance by telling alternative stories or stories from different perspectives" (Nicholson, 63). With *Crawling with Monsters*, we confronted our own realities, we went in the exploration of the thoughts and feelings of our neighbors south the border. But overall, we told our own stories, our people's stories. The interviews were mostly of people we

knew, most of the time close relatives. I believe that by choosing to make our own shows, and deciding to make a show about the stories of our own people, we gained not only respect from the Department of Communication, but earned a special place in the university's history.

In addition, I can say that our aiming was not only to confront society through *Crawling with Monsters*, but also confront our own reality as students of UTPA. Our play was a confrontation with the audience. Sometimes during the performance we felt that we were demanding help from the audience for help or complaining to them about the situation in Mexico. But in reality that is just the nature of our work. We just made the voices of the people in distress heard, we conveyed their messages no matter how hard it became sometimes. As Arrizon argues “every theatrical piece is a whole, an immediate confrontation with society. By nature, theatre itself is an aggressive form of writing: it is written to be taken to the stage, and the stage needs more than what any other artistic form demands: It needs the actors’ corporeality and the physical encounter between what will happen on stage and the spectator, who listens, but most important, witnesses” (Arrizón 1999, 24). Putting the play together, working, cooperating, and getting the project done, we established a real desire to do something else beside the opportunities that the department gave us. We also learned that mainly through Dr. Wiley's guidance, and with self-inspired work, we have earned our own name.

We have gained a lot through the processes of producing of *Crawling with Monsters*. Working on a theatrical project like this has opened not only more opportunities for the Latino theatre community to be more active in the Department of Communication at UTPA, but has also allowed its members to expand their knowledge and discover new ways of doing theatre.

At a personal level, this whole venture has been a life changing experience. I have always been interested in theatre, but now the possibilities of doing something meaningful with it have amplified. I am currently pursuing a career in the field of applied theatre. After my two years preparing at the Department of Communication at UTPA and from the experience I gained working in *Crawling with Monsters*, I applied and got accepted to one of the most respected applied drama programs in the United States, the Master of Arts in Applied Drama of the School of Professional Studies at the City University of New York (CUNY). None of this would have been possible if it had not been part for the theatre program at UTPA.

Is it really not about us? Is it really not about me? The answer is now clear: theatre will always be about the actor as well as the spectator. Theatre is an involving form of art in which all the unities have to be active during the process in order to really overcome its main objective, sharing stories, conveying messages, but most significantly, helping human beings to evolve in both the way we think and the actions we take.

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