PREFACE

Recollections of a Ghost

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ONE JANUARY MORNING IN 1989, I found myself in a clearing surrounded by scrubby woods on the outskirts of the old provincial capital of Chiapas, San Cristóbal de las Casas. I was guiding a group of somewhat bewildered Mayan Indians through a series of physical and vocal warm-ups designed for actor training. The situation was probably as unlikely for them as it was for me. They responded dutifully but with little display of enthusiasm. Most of them were in their twenties, with the exception of one sedate older man who withdrew from active participation. Some were quite stiff and found it difficult to move their limbs independently from other parts of their bodies. Others had a more comfortable rapport with their physicality. One woman was frozen with a mix of terror and determination. Also present was a Mexican writer, an associate of the group who acted as my interpreter. He made it clear that he had some experience with theatre and counted himself my ally. Robert Laughlin, who had invited me to run this workshop, joined in the exercises vigorously. Prior to my coming to Mexico, he had expressed concern as to whether the participants would take to the notion of doing theatre, since it meant assuming the role of another person, a character in a play. In doing so, one ran the risk of losing one's soul in the process. Also present was Peter Canby, a writer doing research for a book on Chiapas. I had met Peter a year earlier at a Christmas party in New York City; I had described my search for folk material from Mexico for a play with my theatre company. Peter had said, "I know exactly who you should talk to." It was Bob Laughlin. And that's how it all began. That, plus a nod from the Librarian of Meso-American Studies at Princeton, Alfred Bush, who had seen a production of mine based on Yup'ik Eskimo material in New York and thought I might be good for the job.

After the warm-ups I had the group embark on some standard improvisations: one of them would get up and engage in an activity: planting seeds in

a garden, reading a newspaper, making tortillas. One by one, others joined. Situations developed. Conflicts erupted. The characters and their relationships became clear. We observers were dumbfounded. These folks had obviously been acting, playing roles their whole lives; they knew what this was all about. It was second nature to them. If the improvisation they were performing took place in the market in San Cristóbal, they would speak Spanish. If it were located in their home, Tzotzil was spoken. As they continued, we felt we were privy to events and behavior that outsiders would otherwise never have an opportunity to witness. There was no self-consciousness; they would easily engage in each theatrical moment as it evolved. They would burst into uproarious laughter at their own jokes, puns, and double entendres. Much of the humor sailed right over my head, and past Bob's as well, despite his fluency in Tzotzil.

Some members of the group displayed more promise than others, but the possibility of them coming up with a theatrical production was not out of the question. We moved forward, continuing the improvisations and exercises, but beginning to focus on a play. We had three weeks. Before I came to Chiapas, I had read many stories collected by Bob from the Highland Maya. There were several on the theme of the lazy man and the *zopilote* (the buzzard). We agreed that they would make a good short play. Palas, our translator, was given the task of writing the script. Maryan (see appendix 1 for full names), a leader in his community who later became mayor of Chamula, seemed a likely candidate for the *zopilote*. He was tall and confident, with a zany sense of humor, and he could move with freedom. Manvel had a good head on his shoulders and was alert and responsible—a little stiff, but that could be used for comic effect. He would be the lazy husband who trades places with the *zopilote* in his search for the easy life. The central character in the play, around whom the action revolves, is the wife. Chavela, who had recently joined the group, would play the part. As time went on, I learned her story. She had left her village at an early age to become a maid in San Cristóbal. Her boss, an American woman, had undertaken her education. She had witnessed her husband's death in a car accident, and she was raising a son, then around ten years old. When she first came to Sna Jtz'ibajom, she fell into the traditional woman's role: mopping the floor, tidying up, waiting on the men. But that was not why she was there; she wanted to act, create theatre.

As rehearsals proceeded, I tried to give the actors specific tasks to do in the scenes to help anchor them in the reality of the play. It was not all easy going. Maryan was great at improvising scenes but had a hard time remembering lines. He could move with ease but could not remember from which side of

the scene to enter. Manvel had a clear idea of what to do, though often after he had rehearsed a scene, he would no longer engage as fully in it as he had when it was fresh. Chavela slowly took her place at the center of the piece, but she was very guarded. It took a lot of coaxing and persuasion to woo her out of her shell. The discomfort of taking a risk can be hard to bear. The other three actors in the show, who functioned as a sort of chorus of nosey neighbors, shuffled a bit and stared at the ground, but they became a forceful presence. Tziak, one of this group, had energy to spare but often arrived late to rehearsal from playing basketball. As time went on, his participation in forward-thinking politics increased, and he was often a strong voice for Sna Jtz'ibajom at presentations and conferences.

The day of the first performance arrived. I had spearheaded the fabrication of a many-colored curtain on a freestanding frame for a backdrop, a big beaked mask and wings for the *zopilote*, and other props. Traditional Zinacantan clothing had been found for the actors. Although we were scheduled for a rehearsal that morning, Maryan did not appear. He had no phone and lived in a distant Chamulan hamlet. We waited until it was decided that someone would have to take his part. Xun was the obvious choice. He and his brother Antun were the sons of Romin Teratol, Bob's teacher in his earlier research in Zinacantan. They both emerged as fine actors and prime movers in the company. Xun had been an efficient prompter in rehearsals and miraculously knew all the *zopilote's* lines as well as the blocking. What a sweet surprise, straight out of show business!

We set up our stage in the courtyard of Na Bolom, since 1950 the home of Frans and Gertrude Blom, pioneers in research among the Maya and Lacandon, and now a haven for Mayan studies. An audience, primarily anthropologists and other scholars, assembled. At that time the group was reluctant to perform in their own villages for fear of being laughed at and compromised. Antzelmo, the elder in the group, a shaman, welcomed the audience. I said a few words with the help of Palas's translation, which somehow sounded more flowery than the statements I was making. The show went on without a hitch: much laughter and applause. Xun was so confident in his role that we all forgot he had not been rehearsing it for weeks. The big surprise for everyone was Chavela. That afternoon she battled away her fear and came out loud and strong.

I went to Chiapas to work with Sna Jtz'ibajom for twelve years, one month each year. Each time we put together a new theatre piece. Early on, Chip Morris, who had spent years helping the native women revive traditional weaving methods and start a weavers' collective, had warned me not to become too attached, too indispensable; otherwise, the group would not grow on its

own. I was also concerned that my notions might put too much of a stamp on their work, but as time went on, I worried less. If I proposed something they thought inappropriate, they would reject it. It was clear that they were making choices. It was also clear that the form of theatre I had been developing with the company I directed in New York shared many of the same requirements as *Sna Jtz'ibajom*: to be compact, portable, spare, yet highly visual and colorful. Both were involved with storytelling, bringing alive myths and traditions. The exception was that here I was working with the people who were the direct inheritors of these stories. This was a rare privilege for me.

Our second play was based on stories of the *Cimarrón* (Spook), an unsavory, black-faced, bat-like bogeyman who waylays travelers out too late and women alone by the hearth. I wanted to get a clearer sense of this individual's character and his physical traits. At our first rehearsal I asked the group to tell me about him. Much colorful and revealing information came forth, some contrasting and contradictory. Finally Antzelmo spoke up, "The time I saw one . . .," and continued to describe a time when he was walking home at night. A *cimarrón* had appeared and barred his path. A knock-down fight ensued, which Antzelmo barely survived. In our play we were not dealing with a picturesque notion from times gone by but a tangible force to be reckoned with. At one performance of this play a whole passel of little girls spent the entire time trembling underneath a big blanket. Occasionally one would peek out to see if the way was clear, then withdraw to safety in a flash.

I saw the group become a working company with all the familiar rhythms of touring productions: packing, schlepping, and setting up. Some of my fondest memories are of performances that took place in remote hamlets, where the primary language was Tzotzil, and they would instantaneously translate their lines from Spanish into their mother tongue. They seemed to add all kinds of jokes—the shows lasted much longer—and the colorful musicality and lilt in the speaking of the dialogue made it a magical experience.

After a few years the group took over the playwriting. They wanted the dialogue to reflect their particular thought processes and turns of phrase more accurately. This was a rather arduous and drawn out process. The whole company was usually present, though only a few individuals were active contributors. Unless I objected, discussions were in Tzotzil, which left me out of the process. For years I begged them to write the play before I got there, but that never happened. Often not even the theme of the new production had been determined in advance of my arrival. For many days they would sit and quibble over a turn of phrase. Sometimes I supplied a plot line. For *¡Vámonos al paraíso!* (*Let's Go to Paradise!*)—the play based on the conscription of Mayan workers

for the German-run coffee plantations in the lowlands—they were moving toward a heavy melodrama about servitude and the tragic separation of family members. I suggested that the central character might be a trickster, a kind of buffoon who made fun of and played jokes on the bullying foremen and bosses often responsible for exacting cruel, punishing labor from the Mayan workers. The group seized on this idea, and the show became a rollicking slapstick comedy that still described the harrowing conditions on the fincas in vivid colors.

One of their most popular plays *De todos para todos* (*From All for All*), written when the Zapatista uprising was in full swing, was the result of a compromise. The Chamulans and Tziak from Tenejapa wanted a play that dealt with the political and economic conflicts then on everyone's minds. The Zinacantecs, customarily more conservative, proposed a play based on folk ecology. The two elements were combined, and the resulting play showed in an exciting way how traditional values and the present crisis affect each other, and that the individual cannot afford to lose sight of either one.

Most of the people in the group had tough, compact bodies. They appeared to have done more than their share of hard, physical work. Their spirits seemed to need lifting. If I could loosen up their bodies, it would loosen up their minds and get their creative juices flowing. One exercise, in particular, involving movement phrases and nonverbal sound came from my time with the Open Theater in New York. In this exercise it is important to jump right in without thinking, to go with your first impulse. It can be very freeing and also very revealing. Particular moves showed up time and again, such as clutching the lower leg, limping and making sounds of pain, or flying like an airplane, arms outspread, with the sound of the engine and bombs dropping, or repeatedly grabbing at imaginary food and gulping it down in a frenzy. Were these gestures chosen simply because they were easy choices when one was on the spot, or did they express something about the shared inner anxieties and preoccupations of these people? It was often harder for the women than the men. Their lives had been more guarded, more sheltered: they were not used to letting loose, especially around the men. But as time went on, they achieved a strong, energized group dynamic that found its way into performance.

The group initially had a poorly developed sense of rhythm. If a dance step was involved, or a unison group movement, a lot of drilling was required. But that also changed over the years. There were occasions—some in rehearsal, some of them social—when we all danced together. Those were particularly joyous times.

In a country where there is such a rich tradition of masks, the Highland Maya of Chiapas are an exception. I taught them simple ways to make papier-

mâché masks. Old crones, poisonous toads, ceremonial jaguars, Earth Lords, jungle animals, German gentry, and don Tomate took on vivid visual representation. The mask of the *Cimarrón* migrated from Sna Jtz'ibajom back to Zinacantán, where he is now a regular feature in the traditional carnival.

Members of the company came and went. Chavela and Petu', another very strong performer, left to create a theatre for women, FOMMA (Fortaleza de la Mujer Maya [The Strength of Mayan Women]), which has received a lot of attention and has made a valuable contribution to redefining the role of women in indigenous society. Both of them are published playwrights. Many other promising performers and contributing members of the group have moved on. While they were with Sna Jtz'ibajom, they brought exuberant, infectious life to their performances. It's difficult for me, the theatre die-hard, to imagine why they would want to be anywhere else. Their commitment to the work and the life of the company was total.

I regret that my command of Spanish remained rudimentary, and I never got to know many of the group on a personal level. In rehearsal, communication was seldom a problem. When words failed, body language, gesture, and tone of voice would get through, although the strangest looks would wash over their faces when I used the wrong word in Spanish.

During one rehearsal when everything was unraveling and drifting apart, Bob leaned over and said, "To them we are only ghosts." Yes, we are outsiders, from another world, looked at with curiosity and bewilderment. But the body of work we managed to create together is extensive, and this would not have occurred if we had not shared a vision of theatre. I'm not aware of there being much abstract discussion about the direction we were taking; the work defined itself through the process of creation. Through this activity the members of the group found their voices and inspired others in their communities.

It's hard to know if any of this would have happened without Bob Laughlin. He once revealed to me that he had been a champion coxswain for the lightweight Princeton crew as an undergraduate. Whatever skills Bob may have developed in that role have matured and flourished in his work with Sna Jtz'ibajom. He has rallied and cajoled, confronted and cheered, and kept the group on course all these years with good humor, a dash of irony, and unflinching faith and determination.