



Bacanal Chipote is a theatre play protagonized by young Nicaraguan theatre artists of **Lleca Teatro**, who took on the fight against the dictatorship in Nicaragua. They are *autoconvocados* (self-convened protesters) and students currently in civil disobedience, who are being persecuted and threatened for their ideas and participation in the protests. Currently accused even of ‘terrorism’ by the Sandinista police and militancy, they have exiled themselves to a neighbouring country to save their lives. It is through theatre and by building a new community of solidarity, preserving their physical integrity and calling on the voice of the international community, that they continue their vision and work in the vein of the struggle of April.



Aesthetically, *Bacanal Chipote* seeks to explore and expand the registers of sensorial, physical and testimonial ways of making theatre. It is a hybrid play in which the actors explore their experiences of what happened and dig into what they *felt* both during and after their participation in the April uprising. Parting from Descartes’ phrase “I think, therefore I am,” they hold onto “*I feel, therefore I am*” – an issue that artistic director Mick Sarria notes “was key for me to be able to keep my body *with me* during the protests.” The extreme situations that the actors faced include incidents of beatings and torture, running from bullets at the barricades, and hiding in safe houses with the uncertainty of being ‘found out.’ This often made them feel like their bodies were not theirs individually anymore, but collectively drawn on – as protective shields against police incursions, but also as running targets.

The process of ‘writing’ the play, then, began during the most difficult days of the uprising, between marches and barricades, between the fear and hurt of the Nicaraguan people trying to at once save their lives and fight for restoring their rights and their freedom. “The most painful experience,” one of the actors explains, “has been to make theatre after crying over the death of a

friend at the hands of the police, to *continue* making theatre after a child was shot down by a sniper, and to *continue* making theatre after the indigenous town of Monimbó was invaded and attacked.” Another adds, “Monimbó is today a sacred ground for those of us who understand and feel the struggle of April.”

Drawing on the testimonies of its actors, but also on the decadency of the current political regime – once an inspiration to leftist movements across the globe - Bacanal Chipote is a visual and sensorial theatre spectacle that envisions a painful path of healing. It exposes the drama of the uprising protagonized by students and youth, but also the end of an ideological era in Nicaragua. It proposes the birth of doubt and suspicion, and the end of ‘one-man leadership’ discourses (known in Latin America as *caudillismo*). It questions the relation between revolution and the danger of passion, and seeks to envision an entirely new beginning. In memory of those assassinated by the regime and tortured in its jails, drawing on its excesses of *bacanal*, it uses as its principal aesthetic element the liquid realm. Drawing on the Chipote prison (a prison carved out of the ground utilized by both the dictatorship of Somoza and now that of Ortega for torture and ‘interrogation’), it seeks to amplify the testimonies of the 700+ people currently being held as political prisoners. While the fight is definitely not over yet, by continuing to make theatre Lleca Teatro seeks to take a step toward the practices and feelings that could help heal the country and as such invites exiled communities and solidarity movements to engage with them in the process of collectively forwarding this play.



The photographs presented above were taken at the abandoned prison of El Fortín (León), a torture jail of the previous dictatorship, where many revolutionaries of the Insurrection in the late '70s were executed. Lleca Teatro's actors clandestinely held a practice here in October 2018 as the first materialization of the Bacanal Chipote play, before fleeing the country.

Background | Nicaragua's Protests & Lleca Teatro



On 19 April 2018 riot police killed two students in a large protest against social security reforms. These were the first students to be killed in protests since the 1990's. Yet rather than calling back the repressive forces and apologizing that same night, vice president Rosario Murillo (who is also the wife of the current president, Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega) called the protesters “miniscule, blood-sucking vampires.” The repression intensified, and as it did, so did the protests.

Over that weekend at least 30 more protesters were killed, most of whom youth.

Images of the brutal repression rapidly began to circulate widely as many protesters were able to film the events with their cell phones. Massive marches were organized and the protests spread from the (public) universities of Managua and León across the country. Within days barricades



were erected in the neighbourhoods and roadblocks installed to stop the police from continuing on their killing spree. Inhabitants of original ‘Sandinista strongholds’ such as Monimbó, León, Matagalpa, and the Managuan Eastern neighbourhoods stood off against the police.

With his back against the wall, Ortega eventually accepted to participate in a National Dialogue. There, both nascent and existing social movements (including student and peasant movements) held him to account – or so it seemed. While Ortega initially allowed for an international human rights investigation of the developing massacre, he continued to order attacks on the barricades.

As the government became increasingly anxious to conquer back ‘the streets’ by 19 July (the day on which the triumph of the Sandinista revolution is celebrated every year), Ortega tanked the dialogue and armed paramilitary groups. These were deployed to realize a ‘Clean-up Operation’ alongside the police. By the end of July the death toll had reached 300, leaving the country and its people in a pain they had not felt since the end of the civil war in almost thirty years before.



Now, after the passing of an ‘anti-terrorism’ law, protesting has been made illegal and protesters are being ‘arrested’ (often without warrant) and processed (often without evidence) by the dozens. Hundreds of people have been taken by force to local police jails, the infamous *El Chipote* prison (a Somoza dictatorship-era subterranean prison), and the *La Modelo* penitentiary in Managua. At this moment over 700 people are being held as political prisoners, more than 400 of them have been officially charged, and over 100 are already convicted of life-long sentences. Most of these people are students and student leaders, peasant leaders, human rights defenders, known government critics and journalists, and youth participating in the protest. They are largely denied their basic rights, mistreated, and even tortured. All the while, the persecution persists and over fifty thousand Nicaraguans have fled the country.



Lleca Teatro & the Protests

From the start of the protests, Lleca Teatro has become a target of persecution and repression. As we worked making theatre with prisoners and former prisoners since 2009, we maintained



mostly good working relations with the Nicaraguan police and National Penitentiary System. While we worked with prisoners, however, we also noticed many ‘irregularities’ in prisoner treatment, abuses of authority, corruptions, and (in particular) the increasing politicization of these state institutions. Part of this was silently and physically denounced in the prison theatre play *Cain y los Perros*, which we toured across Nicaragua between 2015 and 2017. Another part was building up inside of us, as it was building up inside so many Nicaraguans.



When the protests began, the live-streaming of the murder of the first student proved an absolute breaking point. Having participated in the Central American ‘Expo Teatro’ festival in Managua with *Cain y los Perros* just three days before the protests exploded, Lleca’s artistic director Mick Sarria directly denounced the brutal repression. He and other Lleca actors began rallying against the repression, for the stepping down of Ortega and for justice. This was not only on social media, but also in ‘real life’: quite literally on the barricades erected in our hometowns.



The initial euphoric push of the ‘fight against the system’, which the protesters seemed to be winning, at least in the arena of public and international opinion, soon brought very real consequences, however. The police shot at the barricades, wounding and killing people we rubbed shoulders with – friendships forged out of solidarity and a common cause. While these losses clearly convinced hundreds of thousands of protesters, including us, to keep going, we also began to be targeted by government supporters and the police. The same police we had worked with, now overtly declared allegiance to the regime and began to seek us out. Forced into hiding and (now) even exile, as we were circulated by ‘wanted’ posters on social media, and began receiving multiple death threats (as well as unfortunate and painful encounters on the receiving end of police ‘interrogation’ tactics), we nonetheless made the conscious decision to continue our fight by making theatre from the barricades.



The play-in-the-making *Bacanal Chipote* is a fruit of this attempt to grasp the emotions, aesthetics, and physicality of power and decadency – the two elements represented in its title – written on the skin of our own bodies. After having lived through the protests’ actual scenario’s, struggling to cope with the literal and metaphorical damage the repression has done (and continues to inflict in the face of its structural denial by the regime), we are currently in the process of ‘breathing through our wounds’ from our places of hiding and exile, trying to grapple also with those scars that this conflict tore open not only within us but also in our country. “I *feel*, therefore I *am*,” is the subtitle of this play as it has been through feeling our bare life that we stand here now.

In November we came together in Honduras and Guatemala,

where are working on *Bacanal Chipote* and continue our activism. Just as *Cain y los Perros*, we hope to take *Bacanal Chipote* on tour to Europe in 2019. With the tour we would like to not only bring our new play into the world, but also to draw attention to what happened in Nicaragua. Particularly, we would like to draw attention to the situation of political imprisonment in Nicaragua. After all, any of us could have been taken to the *Chipote* jail. Most of us cannot return to Nicaragua. While we, as Lleca Teatro, are deeply unhinged, then, we hold onto the sense of community and purpose that theatre gives us as our means of presence and voice in the face of the repressive forces that seek to silence and disappear our and our country's call for justice.

2019 Première and Tour

Bacanal Chipote will be premiered in 2019 during a European tour with the solidarity movement that has arisen due to the protests in Nicaragua. We are planning to build community during the tour by engaging in public debates, forums, information meetings, and solidarity events – both about theatre, political imprisonment, and human rights in Nicaragua and beyond.



Credits

Fotography

Page 1, 2, 4 and 5 by Lleca Teatro.
Photos at the bottom of page 2 and on page 3 courtesy of the Nicaraguan newspapers *La Prensa* and *El Nuevo Diario*.

Note that most of the photographs on page 1, 2 and 4 were taken at the abandoned prison of El Fortín (León), a torture house of the previous dictatorship, where Lleca Teatro's actors clandestinely held a practice as the first materialization of the *Bacanal Chipote* play.

Lleca Teatro* in the News

[Crisis en Nicaragua será dramatizada](#)

The Nicaraguan crisis will be dramatized. *El Nuevo Diario*, 11 August 2018.

[Campaña de desprestigio en contra de artistas de León](#)

Smear campaign against Leonese artists. *La Jornada*, 13 July 2018.

[Poetas y artistas leoneses denuncian amenazas por parte de grupos afines al gobierno](#)

Leonese poets and artists denounce threats from government groups. *100% Noticias*, 12 July 2018.

*To prevent the identification of current group members and the persecution of former group members (specifically former prisoners we used to work with) Mick decided not to use the group name 'Lleca Teatro' in these interviews, but gave them under his own name.

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