

[00:00:00.0]

Renee Alexander Craft: What's your name?

[00:00:01.4]

Ileana Solís Palma: Ileana Solís Palma. Ileana Del Carmen.

[00:00:08.8]

RC: And what do you do for a living?

[00:00:11.4]

IP: Well, to begin with, I work at living. Thinking that today is the last day of my life. Yes. I don't know. I learned that from Misht [sic?] [her son]; that one always has to live life deeply, as if it's the last day or the last minute. So I always think when I wake up in the morning, today is a good day to die. No? And that means that today is a good day to live.

[00:00:54.7]

Oronike Odeleye: Yes.

[00:00:55.5]

IP: So . . . and I work in theater. Formally, since 1971 at the University of Panama. It would take a lot of time to tell you my whole history. Did I answer your question? I form part of the only theater group in this country that was paid to do community theater. It was called "Los Trashumantes." From 1971 to 1975 or '76, around there more or less. So I got to know the whole Republic carrying popular and historic theater around the country. That was the era of the so called "October Revolution," of Torrijos. Omar Torrijos. I believe that was the only period that this country has given importance to its artistic culture. It was a means to sustain the institutionality of a de facto state. The democratic governments (since then) haven't done anything similar. I was very lucky to participate, to start in theater during that era.

[00:03:06.6]

IP: I was a person from, I was born in a marginalized neighborhood. Well, a poor neighborhood in Calidonia, in what we call "mucky patio." That is, those old houses that have an internal yard that is always full of muck and people fight each other and all that. Here in Panama we call that "mucky patio." The attitude of the "mucky patio" life is that of a woman or people that are given to fights and whatnot. And don't really understand anything about life. Well no, I'm wrong in saying they don't know anything about life, it's that they don't understand the true causes of their misery. Of the meaning of economic and spiritual misery. So, well, I had a hardworking mother and, so, I form part of the middle class that is every day a little poorer. We're more . . . we're right at the top of the lowest economic ceiling.

[00:04:32.2]

IP: So well, I have the great luck of having my art. My art is the only thing that saves me. It saves me from the crazy house. Because I am crazy and I love my craziness, but not the craziness of the nut house. And I have the luck to live in this era because when I think of my ancestors. My great ancestors like Artots [sic?], that died in an asylum because of his wonderful ideas on theater. Well, I think my life has served me well.

[00:05:28.2]

IP: When I started in theater I always thought that, you notice, I repeat that the theater that I was doing was popular theater. It gave me a totally different perspective than what I had. I had a lot of class resentment and, see this, strangely enough my mother worked with the Eleta family. And that's how I know Sandra, since I was a young girl. But I always had resentment. I would say, why are they so rich and why am I so poor? And realizing that I wasn't the only poor person is how theater changed me. The contact with the people and the warmth of the people is what theater, my art, gave me. I do, I am a person that, in this country, creates a theater that is outside of the norm because I don't do theater in the commercial arena. Not because I believe that theater shouldn't pay. Because it's my job. It's my job. But that means that to make commercial theater is to make bad theater. You see? I think that an artist that isn't always searching and constructing languages and bridges of communication with the people . . . because culture is always changing, right? See. So that stagnation, for me, that's not a real artist. It's a . . . I don't know. It's a creator of . . . I don't know. They found a formula to get paid. I don't know. And they repeat it until it's played out, and well, others continue searching and arming themselves and have found other things to make a living. I bore myself. I get bored. You know what to get bored is? To get bored is to say, ah! To be disgusted with life. If I'm repeating the same thing, I bore my own self. So I'm always trying to surprise myself. Because I say that if I'm not surprising myself, in my searching, that is if I don't search for something I won't find anything. So if I don't surprise myself, my public won't be surprised either. They would be bored also. And if it's just to be bored it's best to stay in the house, no?

[00:09:01.5]

IP: The public takes time to come to the call that you put out, at which I'm ready to communicate with you, to share this world of imagination with you, no? And they fall asleep. You don't energize them. So, well. Stanislavsky said of the theater, when a person, the public, enters a theater space and sits down and the play begins and they know already how it's going to end -- that is not theater. That is not art. Art should surprise. The art should appear to be a miracle to the public. Like with kids, the public should be on the edge of their seat. Like this. Like this. They follow you. They want to eat you up, right, with all of their senses. So, well, that's what Celedonio did the first time I saw him. I wanted to eat him up! I was in Portobelo in 1994. I had always been to Portobelo to create works and all that but, strangely enough, I had never been for the baptism of the Devils.

[00:10:44.8]

IP: Because, look, in 1984 I had done work with the kids there. 60 kids from six to 14 years old. Those kids are the ones now that carry forward, by force or whatever, the Festival of the Devils with Sandra. Vicky. All those folks. Vicky was 14 years old then. In '84 to '94. Ten years after that is when I found out about the baptism of the Devils. So I go because Sandra told me about it. She said, Ileana you've never seen, you've never been to the baptism of the Devils! And I said, no, Sandra. Never. And she started to talk to me about Celedonio. This character that . . . So, the festivities started, the baptism of the Devils, and I see a Devil, that, get this, his costume wasn't anything spectacular. It was just a cardboard mask and cardboard wings. But I couldn't stop looking at him. I said, but who is that Devil? I mean, how he jumped. The energy that he has. It's something that you can't stop looking at him. I asked Sandra, who is that Devil. And she says,

that's Celedonio who I've been telling you about. I said, ahhh! Spectacular. I want him to teach me to dance Devil, even though the women don't do it, right? I want him to teach me.

[00:12:43.2]

IP: Well I was fascinated all evening. He was the last one that they grabbed because he was almost uncatchable. That is, he was a home run, no? After that, Sandra introduced me to him and I said, could you, would you like, I would like you to teach me to dance Devil. I know that the women don't dance Devil and he said, it doesn't matter. I am going to teach you.

[00:13:20.8]

IP: So he gave me some classes and he was really happy because in that video he talks about always being hurt that the young people didn't want to learn how the devil character is constructed. How he dances. What the rituals are. Because he came out of the old rituals. So he taught me how the old processes were. Then, well, he told me about how the process was.

[00:14:21.1]

IP: I decided that in the following year, in 1995, I was going to dance Devil. I asked the Congo Queen and King permission. It's a culture that, as you all have studied, have shared in this culture, is very relaxed. That is, it doesn't have very strict rules, like if the women don't dance (devil) they should never dance (devil). It's very casual. So they told me, ok. If you can dance Devil, cool. So I made my mask and everything. I constructed my own mask, my costume and I dressed in red. Because the only one that should go dressed in black is the Major Devil.

[00:15:24.0]

IP: And well, then, I remember that he told me that the game between the Devil and the Congo, consist in the Devil, ok, trying to trap the Congo. And what do the Congos do? When the Devil is close and is just about to apprehend them, they throw themselves on the ground and play dead. See. They don't do that now. No. So when I was playing Devil I grabbed the Congos that I was able to grab and I knocked him to the ground. I knocked him over and then I got on top of them. And I started to (grunts). So then I grabbed one that is lame (has a physical deformity). I don't remember his name and he was on the ground and I was on top and people were saying, the Devil is screwing (sexually) him. The Devil is screwing him. He was going to punch me and in that moment he realized who I was. And then he says, another person told him, hey, hey, that's Ileana. Ileana is dancing Devil. Yeah (he says) but why does she have to be screwing me? You know it's a very macho culture. That's how it went, no? And I sniffed him because Celedonio told me that when the Devil arrives and the Congo plays dead, the Devil starts to sniff him. So I began to sniff him and after I got on top of him. Everyone said, how strange that she dances Devil. See.

[00:17:30.2]

IP: I think that it shouldn't be lamented so much if it isn't done that way (now). Well he (Celedonio) lamented it because he had lived all that era that was a little stricter with the process of the Devil. That was in '95 that I danced Devil. Then in 19 . . . wait a second. I forgot. Oh my God how can I forget these things. Well, because I'm 61 years old it has to be that I already have Alzheimers or it's beginning.

[00:18:25.4]

IP: In '95. Well in '94 when I saw Celedonio, right, with my theater company Black Sheep -- that's my theater company -- I tell him, look there are almost no Devils. Like, the tradition was dying. So we created a show called "Mute wants to be Devil." It was a one person show. That means that I'm alone on the stage telling the story of Mute -- the character that wants to be Devil. Celedonio is his grandfather and he wants to play Devil but he's always really lazy. He's really lazy. So then, if you're lazy you won't achieve anything, right? So then there's a village witch. It's a fantastical story just like the story of the Devils, no? And well, I transformed into all of the characters as I'm telling the story. I presented it, I always present almost all of my works in Portobelo and I presented this one in the Treasury Building with Celedonio there. I have pictures. It was to celebrate him, right. And well, I was in love with those people. With those people. I have written two articles for a weekly publication that was here in Panama called Talingo. I have ones about the Devils and about Celedonio also. No? Published. Published articles. I presented that work in Portugal. I presented that work. I have presented it in Columbia also. I always present it wherever. I can present it myself right here if I want because I don't require anything more than my body, my voice, my imagination and my script.

[00:21:22.5]

[Her son]: You were skinny mommy.

[00:21:24.5]

IP: I was skinny right? Ahhh look. There he is. Come and see it. Come and see it!

[00:21:28.1]

OO: Ok. The video.

[00:21:30.3]

IP: And my hair was long. That was upstairs in the workshop. (Grunts.)

[00:21:43.0]

OO: What were the rituals and how did he transform himself into the Devil? Because he had his own individual process.

[00:21:52.4]

RC: Way of doing it.

[00:21:55.2]

IP: Well, yes. He told me that was actually not from Portobelo. He was from . . .

[00:22:06.1]

RC: Nombre de Dios right

[00:22:06.3]

IP: Nombre de Dios. And how he prepared, he told me that he went out early in the morning over to the other side of Portobelo where the fort is out front and he would stay there until noon more

or less. He didn't tell me what he did exactly. I don't know. It appears that he was in a state of meditation.

[00:22:54.3]

OO: Of meditation. Uh huh.

[00:22:55.0]

IP: In an encounter with nature, no? With . . . no? And well after that he would come back and get dressed and begin to be the Devil. That is to say that from over there he would come back with the spirit of nature inside him. That's what he told me. Then, well, that's it. That when he was young he would teach the young people to dance Devil and that, well, in actuality he didn't like the dance of the Devil because it's very violent. It didn't have that connection between the Devil and the Congos. See?

[00:24:00.2]

IP: Undoubtedly it's a tradition and like all traditions responds to the needs of the community. The community doesn't actually have that need. See. The need, I mean, the need to think of God and the Devil and the Soul and all that. The relationship that the contemporary man has, at least in Portobelo, with God is in a superficial form, right? All of that was syncretism, right. That comes from the Spanish. How they catechized by force on good and evil, no? The seven angels that hunt the demons, the devils, to baptize them. All of that meaning isn't anymore because it's not a community that's based in those terms. And all of the violence that he actually have in our countries, well, it's frustration. Economic frustration. Well it's reflected in the attitudes of the culture, right? The artistic culture undoubtedly. The Devils in Colon are a lot more violent. They put those Gillette and all those things (on the ends of their whips). Well, you all already know, right? But well, they're responding to the world in which they live. See? And Celedonio didn't understand that. That is, he refused to want to understand it and he didn't have a reason to. He didn't have a reason because, how do you call that . . . I think that you all are the ones that, the new generations, are the ones that should try to understand all those processes. You all are there for that. The very community, right, that if they want to understand it, if they want to, if they think, that act of giving it value, of making this expression valuable. It's already a battle, right? It's a fight for survival of the culture and it's essential for the human spirit. Because globalization wants us all to dress just like Michael Jackson. So . . .

[00:27:16.6]

OO: A question.

[00:27:17.6]

IP: Tell me.

[00:27:18.2]

OO: Do you still have the costume that you made?

[00:27:22.5]

IP: Me? Yes.

[00:27:23.8]

OO: And the mask also? You still have it?

[00:27:25.5]

IP: Yes. Oh, my mother. That mask is somewhere over there. I don't know. It's up there somewhere. I'll bring it down in a minute. I'll bring it down.

[00:27:34.8]

OO: Ok.

[00:27:39.2]

IP: Well, as I make masks, I preferred to make my own mask, no? Yes and well. I don't know what else to tell you all about . . .

[00:27:58.2]

RC: I want to know . . . This part has been perfect. Thank you. As Devil -- I'm talking about Celedonio -- what were the unique characteristics that he had playing Devil. I know that you've talked about this in different aspects but I want to hear more about it. Why was he so special?

[00:28:34.6]

IP: Why. Well, I can't explain that to you. It's like trying to explain why people . . . It's not a question of comparison it's a question of energy. Human beings are energy. All of nature is energy. So his energy, well . . . the moment that he played Devil there was a transformation. I can't explain it to you. It's . . . Well I can explain it from the reference point of my work process, no? I believe, I believe, no? When people watch me work, it puts them on the edge of their seat and they're always aware of everything. From the babies to the old people. So in theater, the great teachers and my teacher Eugenio Barba, spoke precisely about the presence of the actor that is an energy that, that isn't . . . In the West we think of energy as movement and when we see that a person has a lot of energy because we see them moving around. No. It's the energy that comes from inside out and from outside goes in. Like a ying and yang. Knowing how to control that is a gift. I have that gift. I have it. It would appear that I'm not very modest, right, but I think that everyone should know what their gifts are. And he had that gift. He had the gift to capture your gaze. He, like I said earlier, that desire to devour him with all of your senses. That force. That energy that he had that was, yes, all encompassing. Like a bolt of lightening that leaves you . . . you can't explain the sensation. See? I don't know. There's nothing else to say about it.

[00:31:37.0]

RC: And in your opinion, what is the legacy that Celedonio has left to the Congo tradition of Portobelo?

[00:31:47.2]

IP: To the what?

[00:31:49.9]

OO: Legacy. The legacy that he's left the tradition?

[00:31:54.6]

IP: Well I think in reality it's . . . The legacy that he has left is about passion. I couldn't tell you if the legacy is about the young people should play devil or whatever, but rather, it's about passion for living. Passion for what you believe in. I think that's the great legacy that he left his village. To do things with great passion. You don't need a great big mask to be a demon, a devil. Right? With just some cardboard you can transform, transform the vision of the spectator to something deeper. I don't know. I'm not from Portobelo and I don't know exactly how people from Portobelo -- because I haven't dedicated myself to doing a study like how you all are doing about the town of Portobelo -- perceive things. I am a little critical of the village. But, well, I don't know. I can't tell you.

[00:33:36.7]

IP: That is the breath. As he used to say, a snort, like a horse. (Grunts.) So, it comes from here inside, no? That is, it makes you jump. (Grunts.) Right? That is the breath. Well when you construct a character, at least in theater, one of the basic things is the breath of the character. Breath is the life of the character. See? If an actor can't find the breath of the character then they're not a good actor and can't give deep life to the character. It stays cardboard. Cartoon Network. That is, the lines of the character, no? So that was what he insisted of me and I saw it and I wanted to capture that breath. I believe it's the most important thing as a creator of characters. It's the most important thing. (Gestures.) Anybody can do that but that energy that comes from inside out and returns back inside, that cycle, not just anybody can do that, right? And, well, he had that. He had the breath of, the breath of the Devil.

[00:35:57.0]