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Publications

American Theatre

Theatre Profiles & On Stage

Play Index

Awards & Prizes

Strategies

Top Ten

Archives

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Staff Contacts

Letter to the Editor

Order Back Issues

Submissions

North-South Embraces

2 international exchanges build cultural bridges between the U.S. and Latin America
By Randy Gener

The Worldwide Virtual Carrousel theatre project, on the other hand, decentralizes North-South cooperation among a growing number of participants. This latter project is an inspiring model of how a nonprofit producing entity (in this case, **Pregones Theater** of the Bronx, N.Y.) has become empowered to work internationally. WVC is, in effect, a path-finding Internet-based exchange and an organ of multilateral artistic cooperation. At a gathering last year in Antwerp, Pregones signed a protocol agreement with the other core members of this ambitious project: Tswelopele Performing Arts (Tembisa, South Africa); **Arena y Esteras** (Villa El Salvador, Peru); **Sering vzw** (Antwerp, Belgium). A troupe of Iraqi artists, Red Zone Company, also belongs to the network; although Red Zone encountered problems securing a visa to enter Belgium, it remains a player.

As Pregones producing artistic director Rosalba Rolón relates it, WVC employs a merry-go-round metaphor as an organizing principle. "We are all involved in developing a virtual theatre school, where we can exchange production ideas, experiences, texts, music, photos, teaching bundles, work processes—anything that's created, we circulate it among the participants from different countries," Rolón says. Through the Internet, this methodology links artists, musicians, dancers and directors from underprivileged communities of the Northern and Southern hemispheres. Intriguingly, Pregones's first full-fledged collaboration did not involve South Americans. Director Jorge Merced and composer Desmar Guevara rehearsed with colleagues from Belgium and Slovakia to fashion *The Brides*, which debuted in New York in 2008. Featuring Rolón, Mia Grijp and Viera Dubakova, *The Brides* was followed by *Pepe's Island* (Belgium, Peru, South Africa) and *First Love* (Belgium, Peru, U.S.A).

"All of a sudden, we have resources from all over the world," Rolón continues. "Right now, we're circulating a story. It is moving from country to country. Each country takes from what we all to add to this pot of creative ideas. Then you let go. Maybe the idea is picked up in Johannesburg and turned into something new and different. Pregones turns the ideas into something else. All the members get together in two years, and we showcase the work. We're extremely excited with the idea of seeing this one core story transform into three different plays. We're also beginning to pick up a collaboration in Colombia so that we can create an ensemble exchange."

Since the success of the Carrousel project depends on the resources brought in by its participants, theatre productions become byproducts of a sort. Intriguingly, Pregones's first full-fledged producing collaboration did not involve South Americans. Director Jorge Merced and composer Desmar Guevara rehearsed with colleagues from Belgium and Slovakia to fashion *The Brides*, which debuted in New York in 2008. Featuring Rolón, Mia Grijp of Belgium and Viera Dubakova of Slovakia, *The Brides* was presented in three languages (four when it later premiered in Slovakia). That show was followed by *Pepe's Island* (Belgium, South Africa and Peru), and then *First Love* (Belgium, Peru and the U.S.A.).

Developed over a four-year period in which Sering has played a lead role in fundraising from the European parliament, the Carrousel partnership grew out of the intrepid years Pregones has spent trolling the festival circuits, attending congresses and offering theatre workshops at places as far-flung as Nicaragua, Puerto Rico, Mexico and the Netherlands. Ensemble training sets Pregones apart from more conventional ways of making theatre, so there was a natural curiosity among its members to encounter how troupes in foreign countries create devised theatre. What they found were other below-the-radar ensembles that share this Puerto Rican troupe's socio-artistic bent, its resolve for community-based interactions and its belief in developing ensemble-based training.

Compared to touring-and-residency exchanges supported by Performing Americas, the Carrousel's decentralized process takes far more time and energy, as well as patience and dedication. For one thing, Pregones did not commit to the Carrousel project overnight. Pregones went through a long flirtation phase with its other partners—almost a nine-year span of checking out one another's work, showing up for workshops, and presenting foreign productions in their own home bases. The Carrousel model is less likely to attract immediate buy-in from U.S. artists, who might view as fathomless the effort the Carrousel process needs, but it makes sense for Pregones, which insists on get-your-hands-dirty collaboration. Says Rolón, "It would probably be easier if we just acted as presenters of Latin American artists and all we had to do is find the presenting money. But the role of a theatre presenter basically limits the exchange somewhat; engaging in a real collaboration is more constrained. When we are working with local directors and artists in another country, our job is to follow them. When they are here in New York, they follow us. We need to identify that this is working but this other thing is not. We cannot push it."