

Petrona de la Cruz
Maya Theater

Translated by Cecilia Chapa

My name is Petrona de la Cruz Cruz and I am from Zinacantán. I speak the Tzotzil language and I was born there, in that town, but I've lived here, in San Cristobal, more than fifteen years. My reasons for coming to the city of San Cristobal were that I was raped when I was seventeen and I had a boy from that rape. So my family wanted to get me out of town and my home; so I came to the city of San Cristobal. I finished school thanks to my aunt's help. When I was in school, I was invited to join a theater group and we staged a play about family planning. I did several tours with them, but I was really afraid at the beginning. I was terrified because, after I was raped, it was very hard to be in a group, to be with people. I was really scared. Afterwards, I felt that theater had been something exceptional for me. It was a kind of therapy that helped me overcome the trauma from my former life. I continued to be involved in theatre and began staging plays with my workmates. The first invitation came from Toronto, Canada, to attend the Congress for Female Writers. At that time, I wrote a play called "*La mujer desesperada*" [Desperate Woman]. It was 1991. After that, I went on several tours and contributed greatly to theater in Chiapas. And by the end of '92 I won the *Premio Chiapas en Literatura* [Chiapas in Literature award]. Thus, encouraged and willing to go on, I continued working and playacting. I got even more excited about continuing my writing. I kept writing more and more, and in '93 I entered a *SEP [Secretaría de Educación Pública]* [Department of Public Education] program called *Rincones de Lectura* [Reading Nooks]. And I got a chance to work in indigenous communities. I work directly with the communities' women and children. With all the information I got from them, I began writing plays enriched by their own words, the words of the people I saw. [...]

For example, in the first play I wrote, "*La mujer desesperada*", I portrayed almost everything I experienced when I was raped and with some of the people very close to me. In that play I depicted my whole life, which is why my troupe didn't want to stage it. They argued that I shouldn't show it in front of everybody for it didn't happen in the community. For all these reasons, I made up my mind to leave the group. Because it was as if they were telling me, "we ask you not to do your job, not to show it, that others don't learn what is happening." I guess they wanted to block out the sun with a single finger. Right? But that's not possible.

After I left, I had more freedom and I put my play on stage. Writing about the rape and showing it to an audience made me feel better. I want people to learn what takes place, even if I don't have a chance to say, "This happened to me." Still, people are becoming more aware and can detect the same in many women that had the same experience and couldn't talk about it because they are scared, inhibited, or for other reasons. And it felt really good to write about it and show it on stage.

I continued my research and wrote a play about Juanita's tragedy, a girl that was sold in the *Selva Lacandona* [Lacandona Jungle] when she was eleven years old. The [buyer's] relationship with her parents began when she was nine. The girl was just a child leading a child's life. She was exchanged for liquor, for a tape recorder, for things her

parents didn't have. They chose to exchange those material things for that girl's future, her life and dreams. It is a true story, published in the newspapers. I did some research to learn more about it and wrote the play. When I took it to the communities many people, mostly the women, came to me and said, "What happened to her has happened to many of us, but what can be done? Sometimes there's no place to turn and we don't know who would give us a hand. The community threatens us. They say that they will continue raping us, that they are going to kill us, and so on". There's a great deal of stress among the women.

Sometimes, when we presented the play in the communities, the men laughed. We don't know whether they were mocking us or if they laughed because they liked the play. We didn't know what the laughter was about since in the play, as I staged it, the rape of the little girl was in one of the scenes. She was an eleven-year-old girl who was bartered. And after she was raped, that girl lost her life. Her husband killed her because she didn't know how to kill a chicken. Because she didn't know how to kill a chicken... She was murdered and the community did nothing about it because the man was some sort of *cacique* [chief] who controlled the entire community. And the parents didn't say anything. They saw the girl's tragedy, the murder, and everything, but no, nothing happened. The man was never punished. He wasn't even jailed. These are some of the things happening in the communities.

There are times when we can say that everything is okay, that the community is quiet because women don't speak up. Sometimes women don't have the chance and the freedom to speak up because they are shy, afraid, and all that. But sometimes, when they are at ease, they talk. Women who come to our group begin to learn about self-worth, health, and rights. Then the workshop goes on and on because they have much to say. When a workshop begins it is cold and stiff because everyone is quiet and no one wants to open their mouth. But later, when they are more at ease and feel among friends, they begin to talk.

For example, in this group we have health workshops in which we talk about condoms, sexual relations. Mainly about sex in general because sex is not only intercourse, sexuality is in everything. And women are ashamed to talk about it. Many of them have never gone for a Pap smear or to the doctor for fear or shame. But after we tell them about it, many of them go. They go every year for the Pap smear and they go to the doctor when pregnant. There have been many maternal deaths for not going to the doctor because men tell them, "If you go to the doctor, who knows what he's going to do to you? He's going to fondle you. You are going to have intercourse with him and that's why you want to go see him". So, they don't go because they are afraid or their partners threaten them, or because other close relations say, "That woman loves to show herself to the doctor" or something like that.

And after we take our plays to the communities, people ask how we did it. They want to know if the community objected or not, if they threatened us, or if we were welcomed. In my case, I lost touch with my community and with my family for many years for the reason that the first time I went on stage, they told me I was crazy, that I was a prostitute because I stood in front of an audience. They said that only people who exposed themselves to an audience, like prostitutes, liked to act. And you have to go through all that. As long as they don't hit us, throw fire at us, or do us wrong, no matter what they

say or refrain from doing, we have to go on. Because if one sits without a flame, like a candle likes to be, then we stop burning. However, if we continue burning and raising our voice to protect our rights, people will try to control you, but they are going to get used to the fact that women are human beings too and that we have the same rights to do what we like and whatever we please. And we also have every right in the world, yes!

Very well Petrona. Are you and your partner the first playwrights in these indigenous communities of Chiapas?

Yes. We are recognized nationally and internationally as the first indigenous women to be dramatists and playwrights. Before us there were no [indigenous] women writers in theater. We were the only ones. When I first joined the theater group, my colleague was the only woman. There were ten or twelve men and she was the only woman. I joined the group and then we were two women. Later, when we left the group, only the men remained. And after we broke ground and organized workshops, more theatre groups formed. [At present], more women are writing, and more women are getting ready to go to school. Now, many indigenous women go to college. So they are coming through as well. Years ago, when we began our work this didn't happen. We were the first women to write and playact.

You have been nationally and internationally recognized. How have you taken this recognition? Tell me also how your family and your community have taken this recognition.

Well, they have accepted it in my community and now they admire me. They ask me how I pulled through, where I found the courage to do it and when I tell them about the rape they say, "No, we can hardly believe that you were raped. You are a new person. It doesn't hurt you anymore." Well, there are times in which I touch the sore spot and maybe tears come. But otherwise, not anymore, it doesn't. It is a part of my past that I've reclaimed; I've healed it. As I said, playacting has been the therapy that helped me out. I've been able to shout to the world, to the audience, about the pain inside, about all I was feeling. Sometimes, when you are angry you would like to get even, but it's not possible. However, when you are on stage you can get even, you laugh, you enjoy it. You live every moment of pain and sorrow, and for me this is very important and satisfying.