

Theatre of the Oppressed:  
Hector Aristizábal Tells a Story of Torture and Transformation

By: Matt Vens

The room is dim and a lone figure stands atop a bench. He covers himself in a black cloth. The lights come on and he jumps to action. Columbia. 1982. The city of Medellín and the haunting question: Where does a terrorist come from?

The stage is set for Hector Aristizábal's solo-performance of "Nightwind" in which he re-enacts the story of his arrest and torture at the hands of the U.S.-supported Colombian military. Hector, an actor-director and human rights activist now lives in exile in Los Angeles and has worked with his theatre arts company ImaginAction for ten years, practicing the techniques known as Theatre of the Oppressed. He travels across the world sharing his story and teaching his theatre style. Today he shares it with King's University College.

The performance, hosted as part of the Centre for Social Concern's speaker series, attracts social justice students, activists, and progressives from across campus and the city. Many are active in the fight against torture and attended School of the Americas protests at Fort Benning – a U.S. facility that teaches torture techniques to South American soldiers. Many plan to attend again this year.

At first unsure of what to expect, the mind is quickly gripped by Hector's movements and his dialogue. With just a few black scarves, some balloons, and a bench, he is able to use the imagination of his audience to tell his harrowing story in vivid detail.

The audience is thrown back to an earlier time in Hector's childhood. He passes and kicks a red balloon. One imagines him and his friends innocently playing soccer oblivious to the world – oblivious for a moment to the violence of his poverty stricken city. This innocence would be robbed by the nation's "four-armies" as he calls them: the Colombian military, the guerrillas, the right-wing paramilitaries, and the cocaine mafia. He tells the audience that he will be burying most of the children we are picturing now.

Next, Hector moves to the political backdrop for his story and becoming Columbia's president, he urges his fellow patriots to protect and defend the country by reporting suspected subversive or terrorist activity. Columbia's version of the Patriot Act – the Estatuto de Seguridad – allows for the government to arrest without trial or rights those suspected of being terrorists or having terrorist sympathies.

Hector is at home studying when Colombian soldiers knock on the door. The soldiers raid his house and search the place for "subversive" material. His mind races to think of what he might have that would be considered "subversive". He believes that he keeps his place very clean, but it is between his mattresses that a soldier finds a Marxist pamphlet. He knows right away it is his brother Fernando's. He does not learn until later that it was

a priest who reported Fernando. The priest had sheltered him and his friends from the rain during a camping trip and had overheard the boys talking politics.

Hector is hauled off to prison with his brother. When he arrives he is lined up against a wall blindfolded, his back toward a line of soldiers. He hears the sounds of gunshots and knows his end is near. Instead he is spared. It has been a mock-execution. He is thrown into a dark prison cell where he is then beaten repeatedly. After days without water he asks for a drink. He is given a drink – his head thrust repeatedly underwater to the verge of drowning – a torture technique called “water boarding”. He is later hung from a pole and stretched like an animal. In a scene reminiscent of the now infamous Abu Ghraib prison pictures, electric shock is administered to his genitals. After days he is finally released by the military.

Again he asks the question, “Where does a terrorist come from?” He reflects on his feelings at the time and after his torture. He felt so much rage and hatred for those that hurt him. He says that if he had known who his torturers were he would have taken revenge on them. He could easily have become a torturer himself. Hector struggled for years with the rage he felt and his desire to inflict violence on those responsible. He used to mock the peace movement saying that there could be no peace without justice.

Justice still seems a long way off for Hector. After being released, he remains in Columbia for seven years working as a human rights activist, psychologist and actor, watching many of his loved ones die. His life is repeatedly threatened and he eventually flees the country to the United States. In Pasadena, California he marries an American and settles down to start a family.

Living in the United States is very hard for him, because of what it represents. His torturers are graduates of the School of the Americas and the U.S. continues to support and offer aid to the Colombian government. “For years I hated being in the U.S.,” he says. “This was the wolf’s mouth, the country I had fought against my entire youth.” Despite the irony that now his tax dollars go to support the institutions he despises, Hector, still takes pride in his work on campaigns to support and protect union leaders, teachers and raise awareness of what American businesses are doing in Columbia.

He has also worked with School of the Americas Watch (SOAW) an organization which lobbies to have the School of the Americas shut down. In 2000 Congress nearly dismantled the school. Instead the Department of Defense reopened it a week later with a new name. Now called the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, it continues to train thousands of Colombian and South American soldiers in so-called “counterinsurgency”.

Hector returns to Columbia for a brief time to help search for his brother Fernando, who is abducted by paramilitaries. His brother’s body is found days later in a ditch beside the highway. He witnesses the autopsy and sees the atrocities they committed during the ten days before they killed him. Again his feelings of rage are rekindled and Hector admits to becoming so delusional that he planned a suicidal mission to kill those responsible.

After he has buried his brother, he asks a close friend to take him to the ditch where they had found Fernando's body. It is in a town controlled by the paramilitaries. Hector is out of his mind with pain and wants to kill the paramilitaries but knows that he is not really a killer and that he will be the one to die instead. But, Hector sees his death as a way to finally end the pain. Halfway there, his friend turns the car around, changing his mind. "I don't want to die with you this way," he tells him. For Hector this moment is when he hits rock bottom.

His work with the Columbian Children's Peace Movement helps him to change. Spending time with children whose parents have been killed, kidnapped, or tortured, or who witnessed massacres and hearing their pledge not to retaliate, helps him to reconnect with his compassion and his desire to create rather than to destroy.

Hector harnesses that creativity into Theatre of the Oppressed – a style of improvisational drama which invites actors to express ideas and feelings through their bodies. It uses the techniques of theatre to encourage creative thinking and action addressing economic and social problems.

Hector invites the audience to join him in this theatre and asks actors to form poses that reflect how each member feels about "Nightwind". Each and every person has a different stance and each means something different to each person depending on personal experiences. "In Theatre of the Oppressed, we don't force anything," he says. "We help people to articulate their own feelings." Hector strikes a pose, his body rigid, glaring and pointing at the audience. He asks people to shout out what comes to mind. Most people shout out "dictator." To Hector the pose reminds him of his son at two years old. He says that if you take time to reflect you might ask what characteristics a two-year-old and a dictator share.

Theatre of the Oppressed was originally created by the Brazilian, Augusto Boal, who saw how improvisational games used by actors can also be used to develop a sense of community and promote social justice. Boal's methods are now being used by teachers, therapists, and a variety of social and community organizations.

Hector's methods are validated by the strong success he has had with it. He tells of one workshop in Ramallah where rabbinical students from Israel and activists and intellectuals from Palestine were put together. Naturally many people were skeptical but Hector says he told them that they were just going to play games. "The fastest way to democratize a room is by playing games" he says. He played the drum and it was not long before he had Palestinians and Israelis dancing. He had them create an image of a totally chaotic world then on the count of three transform that world into an ideal world. He says they ended up in a circle, making eye contact. Some were hugging. At that moment they were not Israelis and Palestinians, or men and women, or black or white.

In a workshop in India, Hector visited with forty inmates in the country's largest male prison. The superintendent of the prison was a brutal despot and had prevented every

organization from providing services to the prisoners. Hector worked with the inmates for hours asking them to create images of the oppression they felt and then imagining what liberation from that oppression might feel like. The superintendent watched them the entire time and then after called him into his office. Amazingly he invited Hector back to work with all of his four thousand inmates. Hector suggests that watching the inmates was the first time the superintendent had really even seen them and recognized their humanity. Through seeing their humanity he himself became humanized.

With Theatre of the Oppressed, "People are not forced to change who they are," Hector explains, "They are invited to experience the other, the unknown, through creating something together."