Outside and Onstage: Experiences of the lesbian feminist theater collective

*Teatro Siluetas* from Guatemala and El Salvador

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Cañénguez (*Teatro Siluetas*, El Salvador/ Guatemala), interviewed by Sruti Bala

**ABSTRACT**

*Teatro Siluetas* is a lesbian feminist theater collective from Guatemala/El Salvador founded in 2011, which uses theatrical means to reflect on the experiences of lesbian subjectivities in Central America. The theater collective approaches lesbianism not in terms of claiming rights or legal recognition, but as a lens through which all systems of oppression and inequality can be understood. In the interview, co-founding member Cañénguez speaks about the group’s attempt to democratize the process of creating theater and work collectively. She reflects on the challenges of performing a play about lesbian lives in rural Guatemala, and the politics of NGOs in relation to the governance of sexuality in post-war Central America. In their play *Afuera* (*Outside*) the collective chooses to not merely stage fictive lesbian characters but consciously exposes and self-critically places their own lives on stage, offering a humorous and honest engagement with issues pertinent to lesbianism in Guatemala and El Salvador today, such as femicides, the role of religious institutions and lesbophobia. Cañénguez makes a passionate case for recognizing theater as a powerful means of feminist activism in Central America, where the stage becomes the site for imagining and articulating same-sex desires.
Q: What is your background? How did Teatro Siluetas come into existence?
LARC: I come from El Salvador in Central America. I come from a middle class family with not many economic resources but with social and cultural capital: my father is a university professor and my mother is a professional actress. I happen to have a Spanish passport, which gives me a great deal of privileges in terms of mobility and education that others don’t have. I went to school in Germany for a few years as my family had moved there during the 12-year long Civil War in El Salvador in the 1980s. Later on I studied in Spain, I went to theater school and then did my Masters in Gender and Development in Barcelona.

I was always part of the theater world because of my mother, who is an actress in El Salvador. On the other hand, I am part of the first post-war generation that grew up after the Civil war, during which all the theater schools shut down, so there were hardly any possibilities to study theater. Also society does not give much value to theater and the arts in general. In the capital, nowadays there are just two theater halls, which mainly program conventional and commercial productions.

I have also been part of the autonomous and lesbian feminist movement, both in Spain as well as in Central America. At some point I was absorbed with the question of how to deal with the questions of the lesbian and autonomous feminist movement through the medium of the theater, and how the spectrum of issues and debates could be opened out to a wider public, instead of staying within the relatively closed, ghettoized circuit of activists, in which we were reflecting and creating knowledge together. The theater group Siluetas is the result of the experiment and of a six-month working process, including extensive discussions with lesbians from the region: we started with a group of lesbians, some of whom were longstanding activists, politicized and with a vocabulary to articulate their viewpoints, and others who had nothing to do with feminist activism, but were lesbians who happened to be in the theater and arts. We created a group together and started to discuss how to speak about what it means to be a dyke in Central America through the language of theater. We gathered with other lesbians in Guatemala to speak about their experiences and we picked up the reflections generated in the Lesbian Feminist School that took place in Guatemala as a space created by the autonomous lesbian feminist movement (in which some of us had participated). Eventually, we were four lesbians, three from Guatemala and myself from El Salvador, who were willing to go into the process of training and rehearsals in order to collectively create a play with the four of us on stage.

Q: Talk about the play Afuera (Outside).
LARC: Our impulse as a collective was to irritate and change the fixed, usually very hierarchical, roles assigned in the creative process of the theater, with a mostly male director having the authoritative voice and actresses executing the director’s idea.