Outside Academia

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Fernando Calzadilla

*Interview conducted on October 7, 2014 and transcribed by Rana Esfandiary, PhD Student at the University of Kansas.*

Fernando Calzadilla is a theatre designer, dramaturge, scholar, visual and performance artist with a multi-cultural background that weaves hands-on experience with theory to expand the scope of his art. His interdisciplinary practice comprises performance, theatre, ethnography, visual arts, and communication processes from a performance study perspective.

Since receiving his BFA in Theatre Design from New York University, Dr. Calzadilla has been working as a designer for the past thirty years. He has designed for more than one hundred productions, ranging from theatre to opera to musicals and ballet. After attending Richard Schechner’s Performance workshop and with his interest in theory and performance, he started his PhD in performance studies at New York University in 1999 where he wrote his dissertation on social Scenario under the provision of Dr. Diana Taylor.

I asked Dr. Calzadilla what encouraged him to get into the PhD program while pursuing a professional career in the theatre industry. Dr. Calzadilla answered, “I was working as a designer until about mid 1990s, designing mostly sets and lights but then I realized I wanted to do more so I started to design costumes as well along with sets and lights. This cost me some good design opportunities since many directors did not want to have a designer who designed everything. On the up side, I was able to form collaborations with some directors, developing a specific language and dramaturgy of design. The untimely passing away of one of those directors, however, motivated me to direct! It was then that I wrote a letter to Richard Schechner. I had first met Richard when I moved to New York City to study design and I saw his performance of *Mother Courage* at the Performing Garage. His performance impressed me deeply and led me to audit his class on Performance Theory at Tisch School of Drama. In his response to my letter, Schechner mentioned that he was doing a workshop during the summer and suggested that I join him in New York City, I did and about two weeks into the workshop, Richard invited me to pursue my masters in Performance Theory. I found the timing to be right since by learning to write academically, I was going to be able to write about my own works besides developing my own theories. In this process, I made the decision to pursue my academics beyond MA and entered the PhD program where I fell in love with theory as a means of facilitating new ways of thinking.”

While working on his dissertation, Dr. Calzadilla moved to Miami and took a job at the Miami Theatre Center as a dramaturge for the production of *Alice in Wonderland.* With his background in design, Dr. Calzadilla was invited to design for the Miami Theatre Center productions. “So I took the job although I knew it was going to be a setback in my dissertation. In fact, it turned out to be a five-year setback.” However, Dr. Calzadilla added that this was and is the perfect position for him since he is able to incorporate his knowledge from his PhD studies into his design works. He added, “This job truly combines everything that I was hoping for. The only part that I haven’t accomplished yet is writing about my own works, but I am hopeful. Kant started writing when he was 63 years old.”

“My design focuses on revealing the structure and the theatricality of the event,” Dr. Calzadilla stated in his response to my question of how much of his design and the way he treats the space is informed by his PhD studies and how much of it is informed by the design practices he received during his BFA studies at New York University. He further explained, “I think it is similar to a chain, one thing leads to another. It was perhaps something that I had been developing during my BFA but then it continued to be reinforced with the theory during PhD. I would like to encourage the audience to think and complete the picture on their own. I am more of the idea to have the audience participate in the event rather than sit back and judge the event from the comfortable and detached position in the darkness of auditorium. This idea of forcing the audience to participate has to do with the performance studies and theory of performance that I received from Dr. Schechner and environmental theatre.”

Dr. Calzadilla’s extensive experience in design led me to ask how much his PhD program let him to integrate practice with theory. He responded, the “Graduate School of Art and Science was very conservative in that sense. They wanted theoretical dissertation, 300 pages, double space, etc. And as a mater of fact, I didn’t resent these rules; I fell in love with theory as my dissertation was mostly about theory. My dissertation proposed a new tool of analysis, which I took from my dissertation director, Diana Taylor. In her book, *The Archive and Repertoire*, she proposes the idea of scenario, which she didn’t develop much since she was mainly exploring the idea of archive and repertoire. Thus, I took the idea of scenario as a way of analysis and applied it to a number of case studies. Since I was proposing something new that had not been tested before, I had to prove its practicality and that meant reinforcing theory with more theory which was more engaging and challenging for me than writing a historical dissertation.”

While working outside of academia, Dr. Calzadilla expressed his interest in teaching by recalling his experience of teaching a performance class in high school for four years. He then added, “I would love to teach a class on American pragmatism and performance studies that is currently not being taught and I believe students are missing that relationship. Pragmatism is performance study, however, it has been looked down [upon] during the recent years as something not cool enough or too utilitarian. It has less to do with subjectivities since it is more about action, and performance is all about action, too. But this relationship has yet to be made and I would love to teach that class but in order to get there I have to put aside my theatre works.”

When I asked Dr. Calzadilla how he describes working outside of academia, he explained that it is very challenging “since when outside of academia, one has to find

a way to guarantee a steady income. Most people with PhD outside of academia end up working for a not-for-profit theatre operating with a low budget. By working for such institutions, your salary is low compared to what you are able to make in academia.” Then as a piece of advice to the PhD students and candidates in Theatre and Performance Studies programs who are interested in pursuing a career outside of the academic world, he added “The only thing that I can say is to be true to yourself. If you really believe in what you are doing, it will eventually come true and people will see it and will be willing to pay for it. But if you compromise to please the market you will fail. Try to be true yourself.”