

**PUSH RALLY PERFORMANCE: REPAIR,
REASSEMBLE, REUNITE**

By Carmen Aguirre

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I'd like to express gratitude to the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations for letting me grow, heal, work, live, and raise my son on these unceded territories. I am from Chile, in Latin America. The Indigenous name for Latin America is Abya Yala. My relationship to my land is that I was exiled, my relationship to this land is that I was raised in exile here. I never chose to leave my land and I still dream that I will return to live there someday. My relationship to these lands is not about displacing others, colonizing others, or exploiting others. I am not a settler. I am a visitor here. I'd like to acknowledge that this country was built with the exploited labour of working people from Europe and the Global South. The violent extraction of land, resources, bodies and surplus value are the conditions for the possibility of what we today know as Canada.

La historia es nuestra y la hacen los pueblos. History is ours and it is made by the People.

Se abrirán las grandes alamedas por donde pase el hombre libre, para construir una sociedad mejor. The great avenues will open once again, where the free man will walk, in order to build a better society.

El pueblo unido jamas sera vencido. El pueblo unido jamas sera vencido.

Venceremos, venceremos, mil cadenas abra que romper, venceremos, venceremos, al fascismo sabremos vencer.

Solidaridad.

Resistencia.

Revolucion.

Hasta la Victoria siempre.

Companera. Companero, que hermoso canto me ha tocado interpretar...

I grew up with all these words. They have deep roots within me. They are part of my DNA. Wherever I go, whatever space I enter, these words carry me, I bring them with me, like I do my ancestors.

These words do not represent hypotheses to me. They are not abstract or theoretical in any way. They describe a struggle, a life, a people, a shared history, a goal, a way of life, a memory. They are written in blood, spoken in hushed tones, sung from the rooftops, chanted arm in arm, waving banners, tears streaming, voices hoarse. They are forbidden words, banned, censored, and blacklisted. Often laughed at, ridiculed, dismissed. They are words that once spoken change the particles in the air. They are electric. A call to arms.

There are few things in life that I would stand behind as absolute truths. Almost none, really. As a wordsmith who has spent thirty-one years at the service of language and its power to define, describe, challenge, invite, recount, remember, name, pulverize, and recruit, I can say with certainty that language is a powerful tool. I can say that that statement is an absolute truth.

Solidaridad.

What does solidarity look like in our cultural community? It looks like building coalitions. El pueblo unido jamas sera vencido. Coming together is much harder than separatism based on reductive and essentialist notions of identity. A sweeping vision that embraces all members of our workplace cannot and should not be easy to accomplish. Conflict should not be seen as a deterrent, but rather as a sign that we are getting somewhere.

Revolucion.

Art and activism for me cannot be disentangled. However, my goal is to create art that poses questions that I do not have the answers to, not to make definitive statements. Artistic and political risk lies in creating work that lives in the grey area and reaches towards a universal truth, not in asserting an absolute truth. So the tension for me lies between putting my skill set at the service of a cause and a community and my commitment to my own artistic vision. The struggle for balance between the collective and the individual, when both hold equal weight for me. Struggle is a fertile ground for continued learning. Struggle is equal to change, which is the only constant in life, in society, and in our work. I have spent my life in the theatre fighting for the right of racialized people to bring our whole selves into all spaces: the theatre school, the workshop, the reading, the audition, the rehearsal hall, and, finally, the stage. The play itself. I have fought for us to be in the theatre without cutting off entire parts of who we are in order to survive there. In order to get work. I have fought in the face of often being the only racialized person in the room. In the face of being told that what I brought was not wanted, that my stories would limit audiences as opposed to expanding them because poor, racialized, migrant

audiences do not count, that who I AM, with all my words and the meanings they carry, were to be left at the door. I have fought in the face of mostly not being able to get into the room because the door has remained shut.

My vision for the theatre is about desegregating. I want a theatre where we all play together. A commons, not separatism. How do we achieve that? How do we achieve it in a way where racialized people, and all equity seeking communities, can bring our entire selves, with all our cultural codes, into the room? Well, we change the room of course. We change the structures. We change the systems. I do not want to call this decolonizing our spaces because that word is not specific enough for me. I don't know what it actually means, but to me it smacks a little bit of diversifying imperialism, of inclusion into capitalism, of recognition as opposed to redistribution. I would like to propose, though, that, if we are to use that word, decolonizing begins with the self. With decolonizing the mythologies of class, race, gender, that exist within each of us. Our own internalized classism, misogyny, racism, sexism, cisnormativity, heteronormativity, ablism, ageism, and so on. It's an ongoing process. When we refer to decolonizing our spaces, I'd rather call it anti-colonialism, because that word has meaning to me. Anti-colonial means anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, and therefore anti-racist. What excites me? A theatre that tackles the tension between the dominant, colonial lens and structure and the marginalized cultures of resistance, with our own cosmologies and words. A true diversity of perspective and voices. A diversity that INTEGRATES the dominant culture, as opposed to banishing it. Yes, we overthrow the current system, ALONGSIDE the dominant culture, and, together, we create a

new system. But how do we come together? And how do we do it so that we are stronger together, putting our collective skill sets and visions at the service of theatre? We must all speak our truths, we must accept that we will not always get along, we must understand that generative conflict is not only necessary, but also welcome when we are working towards a common vision. And the vision I propose is a commons. And what our common looks like is for all of us to dream together. Dreaming as a strategy, not a fantasy. Right here. Right now. A commons as public space where public discourse takes place. We cannot be united without public discourse, which is not the same as agreement. Without public discourse, without a public space where we can disagree, there is no democracy. Public discourse as a public service to society, in pursuit of the public good. How do we get there, companeras and companeros?

That word. That word. With no translation into English, but which encapsulates friend, comrade, companion, colleague, collaborator, lover, confidante, sister, brother, fellow revolutionary.

I have always walked in two worlds, codeswitching linguistically and culturally. What is being asked, in fact demanded in our current historical conjuncture, is that those of the dominant culture start to learn to do the same, so that we can occupy the commons side by side, so that when someone like me walks into a rehearsal hall, I can bring all my worlds and words that describe them, so that I have agency, the way the dominant culture always has. So that our commons is not only diverse in identity, but also in perspective.

A commons where the sovereignty that does exist is sovereignty of thought.

Currently what is being discussed in our theatre community is the opposite. What is desired is a diversity of identities. Tellingly, social class rarely enters the discussion, because theatre in our country is of a fundamentally middle class and liberal sensibility. And identity politics is a middle-class politic that espouses self-identification. You can self-identify as pretty much anything, except class. Because social class is about class relations, a social relationship that exists independently of individual self-identification and self-segregation. In the neoliberal, middle-class identity politics of the theatre, I can self-identify as Latinx but not as middle class. I simply AM middle class. The point I was trying to make is that it is fashionable in our theatre world to be diverse in identity and spiritual cosmology but not in perspective and thought.

Decolonizing as a form of dismantling our own internalized mythologies could start with rejecting the mythology that if other people don't think like me they must be bad and therefore purged from the commons. I'd like to call the last few years in our theatre community the time of the great purge. A shameful time. A time to learn a great deal from. Because it has been a time of cruelty and psychological violence. The opposite of empathy and solidarity. I want to be part of a theatre community where there is a great range of thought, of perspectives, of political positions. If I am to argue with someone because I oppose their views or even find their views harmful, then I'd like the argument to state why I think that person is wrong, not why I think they're evil. Arguing with someone about why I think they're wrong requires reasoned discourse. It demands that I back up my argument. Arguing why I think they're evil usually just requires me to talk about my hurt feelings, and to state that I

feel triggered and unsafe and therefore need a segregated space where I won't encounter any contrary views. It requires no actual content. The time of the great purge has been led by the notion that there is an absolute truth. And that that absolute truth is my opinion on any given subject. And usually these absolute truths are tied to my identity. That, for example, as a Latinx woman of colour, I have the absolute truth on any number of things connected to my culture. And people who don't adhere to my absolute truth need to be cancelled. Fired. Disposed of. Mobbed, publicly humiliated, shamed, and, essentially, sent to the far right. Because that's what we're risking. Sending those who don't agree with us to the far right. Is this what we want?

The time of the great purge, led by the identitarian left, has included the cancellation of a veteran queer theatre artist's play reading which was to have taken place at the publicly-funded theatre he had co-founded and run for over a decade, at great personal cost. He faced credible death threats from the Christian right in the eighties and nineties for the programming of his seasons. He famously met his enemies in the theatre lobby in full drag. New generations of queer theatre artists stand on his shoulders. His crime was to write two provocative and controversial postings on his own blog page criticizing the title and content of a book written by a trans woman. This was not an isolated event, but part of a greater climate of fear, censorship, and self-censorship involving the privatization of tyranny. For this great purge is not being ordered or overseen by the state, but rather by members of our own community who engage in an impenetrable wall of elitist language games. We are all constantly being called upon to be accountable for our use or misuse of language by the purgers, who demand it from their

victims. And yet, the purgers are accountable to nobody. They have no leader, mission statement, board, membership, constitution, or governing body. They have not been democratically elected by anybody nor have they participated in a revolution. Their defense for purging is usually around offended sensibilities and hurt feelings. None of the colleagues they have cancelled have ever come close to breaking Canadian hate speech laws, which begs the question: who in our community decides what is acceptable and unacceptable speech? When and by whom was it decided that there are good and bad people as opposed to good and bad ideas? People are not static entities, they are capable of change. Until recently, when someone was accused by the community of holding hurtful and offensive views, you got rid of the offending view, not the person. In other words, your aim was systemic change, not individual persecution. You held the person to account and then reformed them through education. And even then, if they chose to keep their views, they still stayed in the community. If we believe that someone is seriously wrong, rational debate exposing the person to what we think are better ideas is helpful to the entire community, as opposed to just saying that person is evil and must be removed. Now don't get me wrong, this kind of discourse does still happen in other sectors, but all it takes is a handful of members of our community who hold unpopular views to be purged for the Great Purge to have the desired effect: fear. Self-censorship. The death of democracy and creativity. I do not consent to that. I do not consent.

And so it is that I find myself in 2021, a year into the great plague, talking yet again about the great purge – yes, I've done this before – and about my absolute belief in freedom of speech.

Because I am a wordsmith. Because I believe in solidarity, revolution, and unity. And I believe in a greater vision, something we are striving towards, the commons. The commons includes everybody. Especially those I am in disagreement with.

This summer a co-Artistic Director of a respected independent Vancouver theatre company was purged because he posted a Jordan Peterson video on his own Facebook page and questioned the concept of white supremacy. A debate broke out on his page. That's super healthy, as far as I'm concerned. And although I knew with a sinking feeling where this would all end – with him effectively cancelled from our community, which is, indeed, what happened – I wondered what it would look like if we were in a commons, a space for public discourse, not agreement. And this is what I imagined: a respected member of our Vancouver theatre community, a person with no complaints of bullying or harassment against him, who has behaved professionally at work, feels safe enough to put forth a political view that is contrary to what most people in the community are publicly standing behind. He does it in the middle of a historical moment, in which systemic racism in our community is at the forefront of the discussion like never before. Seeing as this is all that is being discussed for weeks on end on social media, it makes sense that this person would jump into the discussion. But with an opposing view. One could argue it's an offensive view, a disrespectful view, an insensitive view, a racist view, a very ill-timed view. But a view nonetheless. In a commons, we would have it out, argue, debate, tell him why we think he's wrong, which did happen. He would argue back, tell us why he holds the position that he holds, and, if we can't convince him of our views and he can't convince us of his, we now know where

everyone stands, including him, and we keep him in the community. And he doesn't have to leave or be purged because he knows and we know that although we disagree with each other, we can still work together. Because he's a good person to work with. And friends and colleagues who may want to defend him can do so without fear of they too being cancelled. Because his views may be opposed to mine, but, as long as he's not actually treating people badly in the work place through bullying and harassment and assault, and as long as he's not engaging in hate speech or organizing a white supremacist death squad, he's allowed to stay. Why do we expect everybody in our theatre to have the same ideology? When we work at a factory or at a restaurant, do we expect our co-workers to have the same political views as ours? The theatre is, at the end of the day, not a social movement but a workplace. If we want uniformity of thought in our theatre world, as opposed to sovereignty of thought, we have no right to claim that we strive to be inclusive and diverse. We have no right to be making art. As an aside, this man took the Jordan Peterson video down and asked for the community to educate him. He was eventually accused of extracting free emotional labour.

Language is a powerful tool. I can say that with absolute certainty. What does it mean to cancel someone? Where do the cancelled go? What does it mean to cancel a life? What does it mean to erase years of good work? How do we work in a community where many wonder if they will be next? How can we call this a free and healthy workplace?

What is revolutionary is keeping all members of our community in. So that we are strengthening as opposed to purging. So that we are growing. So that we are learning how to argue, how to

accept others as they are, how to work with those whose views we do not hold. So that we are not sending people to the far right.

La historia es nuestra y la hacen los pueblos. History is ours and it is made by the people. Salvador Allende spoke those words on the day he died defending Chile from a far-right coup. What followed was fascism. Books were burned. Murals were covered with black paint. Leftist artists were imprisoned, tortured, murdered, disappeared, exiled. I heard his speech as he was giving it, as bombs were dropping around him. His words live within me. I made a vow to always follow them.

La historia es nuestra y la hacen los pueblos.

I do not consent to being part of an arts community that engages in witch hunts of people who don't think like me. I want the time that follows the great plague and the great purge to look like this: we keep people in, we educate people who we believe have views that are wrong and hurtful, we are okay working with people whose views we oppose. We accept and welcome productive conflict. We are radically democratic and free. Some are of course already doing that. I invite us all to follow their lead.

How do we come together? History is ours and it is made by us. So we decide. Together, companeras, companero, que hermoso canto me ha tocado interpretar, que clara aurora cada dia veo brillar... a ti, a mi, a nosotros...