

ABD Productions' ANDARES: We go on walking
Deirdre Visser © 2015

In high school in San Francisco in the mid-1980s—with a developing political consciousness and a nascent critique of my government's policies—I railed against U.S. support for a repressive regime in El Salvador and the contemporaneous and illegal funding of the Contras in Nicaragua. But my knowledge base, while it continued to develop through college and beyond, was fundamentally abstract; the conflicts I protested in the streets and struggled to comprehend were a million miles from the comforts and safety of my life in the Bay Area.

San Francisco-based choreographer Anne Bluethenthal, Artistic Director of ABD Productions, has made a career-long commitment to grappling with urgent social justice issues. This past year she premiered ANDARES, an ambitious and eloquent dance theatre production created in collaboration with six Salvadoran artists and former combatants, as well as Salvadoran émigrés living in the Bay Area. In ANDARES, the 12-year civil war that devastated the small country is anything but abstract. Histories repressed—often left untold even to a survivors' most intimate companions—were illuminated and rendered vividly tangible. Through a seamless blending of dance, spoken word, and music we learned what words alone cannot convey about brutality *and* humanity.

The long-running civil war saw the death of 75,000 Salvadoran citizens; hundreds of thousands more emigrated, many to the U.S. Untold numbers of Salvadorans were “disappeared,” leaving loved ones waiting in a state between—just waiting, scouring descriptions of the deceased for recognizable signs.

In May in a small building at the farthest edge of San Francisco, a site itself formerly a fortified military base, the audience for each of three sold-out shows was treated to a luminous performance, an act of remembrance, a gesture of defiance, a call to action. The Firehouse at Fort Mason is an unconventional performance space; there are no risers, no green room, nor a backstage, because there's no formal stage. And yet ABD made assets of its peculiarities. Utilizing two small adjacent rooms as well as the main “stage,” Bluethenthal and her collaborators took us on a short migration through time and space, into a site responsive performance installation that called out the many facets of the Salvadoran civil war, positioning this tragic historical moment urgently in the present.

In *Cuarto de Memoria*, (the Memory Room) an installation designed by artist and Salvadoran émigré Victor Cartagena, we stood around the perimeter of a small room, pressed shoulder to shoulder with our neighbor, watching the dancers move among a dense forest of photographic transparencies, portraits conjuring the tens of thousands of dead and disappeared. The dancers wilted into each other's arms again and again, in a gesture simple and aching intimate, accompanied by the stunning voice of Mauricio Lopez with guitar accompaniment by Ennio Sol. Performers called out in remembrance—shouting “Presente” after each name—those loved ones of the Salvadoran collaborators who were lost, dead or disappeared, echoing the unbearably real loss of brothers, mothers, sisters, lovers, fathers, who left to go Christmas shopping and never returned.

The close quarters amplified both the moments of explosive physicality and grieving remembrance. The intensity of the dancing, wrote choreographer Mercy Sidbury, operated as metaphor for the “full commitment that the combatants had to their struggle, dancing or fighting as if their lives depended on it...I loved having them on top of me and was amazed by their force.”

Stories of war are most often told by men, and most often those men who emerged victorious. They are narratives of heroic acts, grand battles, tragic betrayals. And indeed the threads of those stories do appear throughout ANDARES. ABD's collaborative partners, all artists, musicians, former combatants, lived the histories they told, narratives of brutality, fear, bravery, and revolutionary passion. Echoes of the ideological idealism that fueled the revolutionary movement can be heard throughout. But Bluethenthal's feminist ethics, informed by collaborator Patricia Morales, can be found in the humanizing emphasis on the quotidian, the daily intimacies of sharing an extra onion to spice up a meal, or using humorous nicknames to deflect the indecencies of injuries sustained. Particular attention is paid to the contributions of women in a second anteroom, titled *Mujeres en Lucha*, Women in Struggle, which illuminated the role of women both in sustaining relationships and fighting side by side with their male counterparts in combat.

In community collaborations the ambitions are many. When you begin a conversation with collaborators—and this time across language, time zones, cultures, political boundaries—you're making a commitment, a promise, to hold their still-untold stories with integrity. Even for Bluethenthal, with a 30+ year practice of engaging with community through her choreography, this was an ambitious undertaking. ABD maintained a high degree of fidelity to the

stories and talents of their Salvadoran partners, while honoring the movement vocabularies of their local dancers and the choreographer's own aesthetic voice.

If one barometer of their success is the feedback of their collaborators, ABD did an extraordinary job. To a one, their Salvadoran collaborators described feeling pride in the ways in which their stories, their words, were translated onto the stage in spoken word, song and choreography. They also all conveyed their urgent desire to continue to work together in collaboration with Bluethenthal and ABD, to bring the work to El Salvador, and then back to the US with ever more depth, nuance, and clarity.

As I write these words the news is replete with coverage of the hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees fleeing the barrel bombs and repression of Bashar al-Assad's government. And in the years between we've witnessed the ravages and excesses of repressive governments, from Rwanda to Nepal and many places in between, staggeringly familiar and difficult to reconcile with the inspirational populist movements for reform. At home in our own streets, communities are fighting for justice and equity on levels interpersonal and systemic. The stories told through ANDARES do not reside in the past, relegated to history books, torn protest posters, or the exigencies of memory. These stories are all too present and urgent. "ANDARES" can be loosely translated to mean *we go on walking*, go on struggling for justice and equality. These stories of humanity and hope against a backdrop that could easily bring one to despair, demand that we meet them there and go on walking.