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Mass on the Border:

Encounter, Hope and Love





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Cover: Hundreds turned out at
the Border Mass on the Rio Grande on
All Souls Day to pray for the people
who lost their lives seeking to create a
better life in the United States.



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Images of Immigrants in Teatro la Fragua's *Navidad Nuestra*

By Mike Warner



The Journey to Bethlehem, (l to r): Jesly Mejía, Tony Díaz and Gerardo Ochoa.

I encountered *Navidad Nuestra* during my first stretch as a visiting artist with *Teatro la Fragua*, the Jesuit theater company in Honduras, founded by my brother, Fr. Jack Warner, SJ. *Navidad Nuestra* opened for me a Shakespearean mirror into the nature of the real Honduras. And, almost immediately, that mirror revealed the central role that immigrants play in the Nativity story.

Jack established *Teatro la Fragua* in 1979 as a way to awaken people's creativity to find solutions to real issues. Of course, a theater wasn't the obvious choice. In addition to the artistic and logistical obstacles, imagine the elevator speech that had to be concocted to tie together three seemingly disparate topics: Jesuit? Theater? Honduras? Yeah, it was a longshot.

But magic happened a few years on, when Jack's genius harmonized the Jesuit-theater-Honduras dissonance by choosing to stage biblical stories. He suddenly had a wealth of material: the stories obeyed Shakespeare's first law of theater (to mirror nature), and Jack could access multiple copies of scripts.

Out of this prophetic clam shell, *Navidad Nuestra* emerged.

Navidad Nuestra (*Our Christmas*) has since matured into a part-play, part-festival, part-lessons-and-carols celebration that *Teatro la Fragua* has mounted every year since.

The Migrant, Holy Family

In my cradle-Catholic upbringing in the United States, no teacher or nun, no priest or parent ever associated Christmas with immigrants. But the first time I saw the Nativity story from a Honduran perspective, I felt a Nativity that took place on the frontiers, far beyond the comfort and familiarity of home.

In fact, once the story gets going, our protagonists – Mary, Joseph and Jesus – never see home again, and spend the rest of the story displaced, seeking shelter or running from the law.

None of these stories is *about* immigrants; they weren't written as and haven't been observed over the centuries as "immigrant stories." That separation from contemporary news makes them excellent lenses through which to view current immigration: the stories are politically agnostic and focus instead on people experiencing forced displacement.

The immigration in *Navidad Nuestra* is not a response to our current political climate; it is a reflection of the nature of the human condition through the lens of the Gospel.

The point: We are a people on the move, a species of immigrants, and our sacred scriptures emphasize that.

Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Joseph and Mary and Jesus, Peter and Paul were all driven from home. They were all immigrants, and their experience as immigrants remains central to their role in our faith. That faith does not simply respect immigrants or demand justice for immigrants. As people of faith, we pray that immigrants will accompany us.

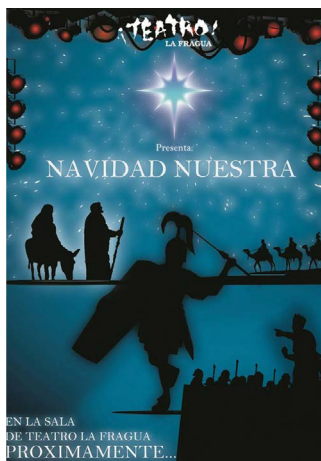
Honduran audiences were way ahead of me in recognizing this. For decades, audiences to *Navidad Nuestra* have seen Hondurans uprooted and on the move in the Christmas story. María is shaken to receive news of her pregnancy, and travels to the mountains to spend three months with her cousin Isabel. José and María journey to Bethlehem and find no place to stay. Migrant farmworkers are mystified that God might share the news first with them. Mysterious strangers cross borders to see the child.

Then the local tyrant declares war on infants, and José and María find themselves again suddenly displaced and on the road, broke and weary as they flee the tyrant's fury.

At the end, José and María return to their homeland, but not to their home, since it no longer offers refuge. Instead, like so many Hondurans, they remain displaced, vulnerable to the poverty, violence, oppression, persecution or natural disasters surrounding them.

This depiction didn't spring out of the vapor. Long before *Teatro la Fragua* took up the biblical accounts, artists had explored the human experience behind the narratives. From the beginning, painters and minstrels and storytellers have portrayed images of immigrants in the Christmas story.

Navidad Nuestra joins that tradition. The script follows the nativity stories in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew almost verbatim. It then expands on those scriptural sources, adding carols, dance and fragments of three older nativity dramas from Spain, France and Honduras. In the process, *Navidad Nuestra* reminds its



audiences that the Nativity story has always been a story of immigrants.

A Familiar Tale

The angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she will bear a son, whom she will name Jesus. This disruption in Mary's life would prove to be, in playwrighting parlance, the "inciting incident," and would displace her from home, from her everyday life, from belonging.

This disruption led immediately to displacement, to a migration without which we would have no Visitation story and no *Magnificat*. In *Navidad Nuestra*, the actor playing the Evangelist speaks directly from Luke's gospel:

In those days, María went in haste into a village in the hill country of Juda, and entered the house of Zechariah and hailed Elizabeth.

In the telling by *Teatro la Fragua*, María goes to a recognizably different locale, and *la Fragua's* stage directions fill out the picture of the Visitation:

María visits her cousin, who lives in a remote village in the mountains. Naturally, as in any typical Honduran village – or any remote village anywhere – the house is surrounded by animals (pigs, chickens, cats, frogs, sheep, goats, whatever) and guarded by a dog.

This depiction of the journey to "a remote village" mirrors actual Honduran experience – Honduran audiences recognize the rural life depicted on stage. Due to the social upheavals of the last 40 years, many peasants from the interior highlands of Honduras have moved into the fringes of the cities. As a result, whether the play is performed in the city of El Progreso or in a mountain village, the audiences see their own families, split between rural and urban settings. They recognize their own regular but arduous travel, undertaken to attend to daily life: family, jobs, crops, churches, schools or markets.

Migration is a part of life for a Honduran audience and for this Honduran retelling of the Nativity story.

After María returns home from visiting her cousin, she and José comply with Caesar's decree and head out on foot to Bethlehem, a hundred miles away, a grueling, dusty, dangerous journey for a woman close to term.

As they come into Bethlehem, *Navidad Nuestra* borrows a fragment of a 19th-century shepherd's play by Fr. José Trinidad Reyes, the first Honduran playwright. The visual cue comes from Bruegel's *Numbering at Bethlehem*, itself set in 16th-century Flanders. A young woman from Bethlehem speaks:

*As I was passing by the inn
A beautiful young girl arrived,
Big with child and near her time;
An older man accompanied her.
In the courtyard of the inn
They knocked and called for help.
A sinister-looking, hoarse-voiced man,
Noting at a glance that they are poor,
Cuts them off and answers harshly:
"Beggars should look somewhere else;
Here the only king is gold."*



The Birth of Jesus Christ: Front, left to right: Nery Hernández, Jimena Cartagena, José Inestroza. Rear, left to right: Fabricio Banegas, Anthony Amaya, Tony Díaz, Jesly Mejía, Gerardo Ochoa, Julissa Reyes

This scene pulsates in a world of poverty and border walls and razor wire. Hondurans watching this play see the parent, the sibling, the child they have lost to migration. These families recognize a world where the only king is gold.

The story continues as, on a bare stage, María and José act out, simply, through mime and dance, the arrival, the search for shelter, the first labor pains, the birth, as three actors retell the most well-known text in the history of literature:

And it came to pass that while they were in Bethlehem, the time arrived that María should give birth. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

This short phrase, this no-room-in-the-inn part of the Christmas story, has been appearing in the arts for as long as we have records. The image on stage mirrors first-century Palestine, 16th-century Flanders, 19th-century Honduras ... and 21st-century Honduras. The universality of the nativity story jumps from the stage.

And then: *There were shepherds in that region living in the fields and keeping the night watch over their flock.*

Shepherds often bring some comic relief to the nativity stories. *Teatro la Fragua* mines this comic tradition. Strangers enter upstage, with lots of light and a big choral section. Shepherds get freaked out by voices from the sky.

Sheep scatter in a woolly frenzy. The kids love it. But, as always, *La Fragua* digs deeper, and their audience accompanies them. The audience sees a group of intelligent but impoverished people “living in the fields” and watching over their flocks.

How many of our assumptions do you and I need to peel away before we can feel what the shepherds felt?

Navidad Nuestra peels away a lot of assumptions, and audiences shed even more. “Living in the fields” would not, to most Hondurans, sound like a line from a piece of romantic poetry. “Living in the fields” would mean living in the fields, somewhere in an abandoned banana camp or in the mountains, trying to avoid detection by the company muscle or the paramilitary gang.

But God appoints these migrant farmworkers to lead us to the truth: *Fear not, for, behold, I bring you good tidings, which shall be cause of great joy to all people.*

And with that, the angels reveal the divine plan in which God shares the message first with the outcasts of the empire, with people living on the deepest fringes of the frontier, and tells you and me to abide by their message, to accompany them.

And then the emotional arc veers back to a harsher scene.

How to share the story of Herod? How to illustrate his leading role in displacement and migration, in first-century Palestine and today – and throughout history?

You and I don't see much of Herod in the States. But *La Fragua* takes Herod seriously. Deadly seriously.

Navidad Nuestra introduces Herod as a comic figure, a buffoon with arbitrary power (a borrowing from the Medieval tradition). He appears as a hybrid paramilitary commandant, drug dealer and pimp, whose thinking is slow and who has to rely on his herald for protocol when the Magi visit. This petty tyrant is insecure and narcissistic, he doesn't like aliens, and he stumbles repeatedly in his dealings with the urbane Magi.

But the light bulb finally glows when he realizes that the Magi have news of a *NEW KING*! Herod goes reptile, and the stage directions explain:

Herod, the empire's puppet-king, must have been the same animal as imperial puppets throughout the world. Matthew gives us no clue as to the exact tactics he used to exhort his troops to commit history's most infamous massacre; but it is logical that they would have been more or less the same tactics used by his ideological descendants today.

The stage directions note the "horror and unintelligibility" of the massacre. Those descriptions may look passé to our refined sensibilities, but in Honduras, the mirror reflects real life. The following scene depicts actual events in Honduras:

SOLDIER (tossing a baby into the air): Death to the subversive child!

SOLDIERS: Kill him!

(The SOLDIERS all raise their bayonets to snag the prize, and freeze in this final pose, holding it long enough to make sure that the horror of this moment fully sinks in to the audience.)

In Honduras – as in most of the world, and in every era – people have experience of some kind of state-sanctioned slaughter. Such genocides occasionally pop up in our news feeds, but they are more likely to go unnoticed and undocumented. But let there be no doubt: the Herods of our world continue to displace people forcibly, turning peasant farmers and school-teachers and working mothers into refugees.

Navidad Nuestra includes numerous other images of people on the move. I've barely mentioned the Magi, the exotic and eccentric travelers from distant lands, or the protagonists' return from Egypt. Or the scene of commoners fleeing the massacre, a dance entitled *Flight of the Wetbacks*, choreographed to a song – *Caminos Verdes* by Rubén Blades – that speaks directly

of the undocumented immigrants trying to cross the river from Colombia to the more prosperous Venezuela.

Immigrants are everywhere, and ours is not the only river.

Migration and the Arts

Theater has a power that economics and technology and law will never have. Theater – like all the arts – puts the viewer inside the characters on stage. The character stops being a "them" and becomes a "me." We feel what the characters feel, we see the story from the inside, from within.

This "within-ness" in *Navidad Nuestra* anticipates the Jesuits' Universal Apostolic Preferences, or in fact, illustrates one outpost where the preferences appeared in early, rough-draft form: "a Church that goes out, a Church of the frontiers, a field hospital where wounds are bandaged, a Church where hearts are healed and love is once more made possible." (*Universal Apostolic Preferences*, Society of Jesus).

Navidad Nuestra ends joyfully, with the Holy Family

back in Nazareth, accompanied by music and carols. The musicians pick up the pace, and the song transitions to the *punta*, a traditional Carib

dance rhythm. The actors invite the audience to join in the dancing, while Jack watches silently from behind the bleachers. The celebration keeps going as long as the musicians' repertory of *villancicos* – Spanish-language Christmas carols – lasts.

At some point and on cue, the actors invoke the chant that ends every *Teatro la Fragua* performance:

*Earth, air, fire and water;
We are all Teatro la Fragua.*

Indeed, we immigrants are all Teatro la Fragua.

Theater has a power that economics and technology and law will never have. Theater – like all the arts – puts the viewer inside the characters on stage.



Mike Warner is a contributing writer with Teatro la Fragua. He lives in Charlotte, N.C., where he writes and presents on images of immigrants in the arts.