

NARRATIVE FOR "THE BANANA PROJECT"

Purpose of the Project

Given the prominence that Central America has taken in the present government's agenda, and how little we, as American citizens seem to know and understand of the history of these countries, George King and Ruby Lerner felt that "The Banana Project", a multi-media performance and exhibition, could provide a useful tool to the community in understanding current events in the region through the presentation of an historical perspective. The piece deals with the themes of racism, United States foreign policy, dependency economies and information manipulation--told through the rise and fall of the banana trade.

Seeing an informed citizenry as one element necessary for the success of democracy, the project producers hope to raise awareness about Central America, to encourage participants to seek out their own sources of information, and to raise the issue of our complicity, often through ignorance and non-participation, with policies with which we may not agree.

In order to enhance the visibility of this important foreign policy issue, the production has been scheduled to run for three weeks, and to coincide with the 1988 Democratic Convention to be held in Atlanta in July.

History of the Project

Following George King's trip to Nicaragua in 1985, it became clear to both him and Ruby Lerner that they did not personally have a clear understanding of the goals of current U.S. policy regarding Central America, nor did they grasp what the history of the relationship between that region and the U.S. had been in the past.

Determining that their lack of awareness was probably shared by many, in January of 1986, George King and Ruby Lerner spent a month in Mississippi and at the Latin American Library at Tulane, doing research for a performance piece which would examine a history of United States involvement in Central America. What resulted from this process were a host of ideas for scenes and vignettes, facts about bananas, recipes, dance steps, songs, documents and United Fruit Company memorabilia and photos, all of which together revealed an astonishing series of events and stories--events and stories that never made their way into our high school history textbooks.

In April of 1987, King and Lerner went back to write a working draft of the piece. Financial support, amounting to over \$8,000 for initial development, was secured from the Fulton County Arts Council, the Bureau of Cultural Affairs of the City of Atlanta, the Rockefeller-Inter-Arts Initiative, Art Matters and Alternate ROOTS.

A variety of in-kind support, also totaling over \$8,000, included space and equipment contributed by Nexus and Image Film and Video and local corporations.

At that point the piece was conceived as a "play," (envisioned in a vaudeville style) although the authors were not wholly satisfied with that approach to the material. Readings were held at the Alternate ROOTS annual meeting and festival, and at Seven Stages Theater to get critical response from peers prior to undertaking the final stage of the developmental process--an in-progress production for 3 nights at Nexus in December of 1987. A "breakthrough" only 10 days prior to the Nexus workshop provided a new metaphor for the production--that of an information theme park--an "info-tainment." A remarkable effort on the part of a number of visual and performing artists in the short period of time available allowed the piece to be presented to an enthusiastic and diverse audience.

The workshop production achieved what it was designed to do:

1) Help the authors find an appropriate artistic form for the vast amount of diverse research they uncovered.

2) Help the collaborating group of artists to figure out efficient ways to move people through that information.

3) Help the artists to see what was missing and would need to be included in any future full-scale effort.

4) Assist in welding together an imaginative and effective team of collaborating artists and technical personnel.

While skeletal, the December production at Nexus addressed all of these concerns, and the project is now ready to move on to its next step: a fully-produced performance/exhibition designed to reach the widest possible audience. Most of the materials purchased and created for the Nexus run will be re-utilized in the future production. Essentially the project is an ongoing one that began two years ago and will hopefully have a life beyond the Seven Stages run. To date, there has been an investment of over \$16,000.

Through appropriation of a form (the theme park) from twentieth century popular culture, the producers hope to attract an audience that might not attend a "play" dealing with the same issue. The piece is designed for several different types of individuals and groups: 1) those who may have already formed attitudes about the current situation in Central America--attitudes which either support the administration's position or reject it, but who have formulated their opinions without having any real information or historical basis, and 2) the group of people who don't really know how to feel about the issue because they currently lack information.

History of the Sponsoring Organization BANANA PROJECT

Throughout its history, Seven Stages Theater has made a commitment to dealing with the social and political issues confronting contemporary society and to presenting a diversity of viewpoints about these issues. Committed to multi-cultural casting in all its work, it has also been one of the few theaters in the region to program the work of black and gay writers on an ongoing basis. Its relationship with South African writer Adam Small brought the horrors of apartheid to our door, and its commitment to dealing with racism in America brought the Klan to its door in 1986. Continuing its commitment to exploring controversial issues, Seven Stages will co-produce "The Banana Project."

Seeing an informed citizenry as one element necessary for the project producers hope to raise awareness about Central America, to encourage participants to seek out... A grant from the Fund for Southern Communities will help to support the efforts of approximately 20 visual and performing artists working on the project, freeing up more of Seven Stages' resources for technical production, and ensuring wide promotional efforts to reach potential audiences. The grant would also help in producing an extensive program which would serve as a guide through the performance/exhibition, and would also provide an extensive bibliography and list of organizations to contact for further information--in other words a reference tool for people after they leave.

History of the Project

AMERICAN THEATRE, the national monthly publication of the Theatre Communications Group, has commissioned local SOUTHLINE writer Steve Murray to write a short article about the project for their July issue, and a theatre in Chicago and one in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, have also expressed interest in producing "The Banana Project", which means that the impact of the project could extend even beyond our own community.

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"The Banana Project" is a collaborative cultural project dealing with the themes of racism, US foreign policy, dependency economies and the manipulation of information, better known as "public relations". These themes are examined through a mythical "theme park", BANANALAND, which tells the story of the rise and fall of the banana trade in Central America, and concomitant U.S. State Dept. and CIA support. The work provides an historical context for audiences/viewers to better understand the current role that the U.S. plays in Central America. The working group believes that the collaborative nature of the project and step-by-step planning have enabled us to experiment in finding an original, imaginative and effective way of entertaining, informing and challenging a public that is increasingly skeptical of TV and theater.

Project directors King and Lerner spent three months in Washington and New Orleans researching the astonishing history of the United Fruit Company's involvement in Central America. Based on this research, the producers organized a series of readings and then, in collaboration with other artists, staged performances of the work-in-progress. (Please see attached newspaper articles and reviews).

During July of this year the collaborating group of artists have been invited to produce the fully-fledged work at Atlanta's Seven Stages Theater during the 1988 Democratic National Convention.

LIST OF "EXHIBITS" IN BANANAWORLD

Essential Information

1. GROWTH CYCLE OF THE BANANA

- a. Railroad Tour of Banana Plantation.
- b. Ford Educational Film. We have this already.
- c. Taped Voice with Slides. We would need to put slides together (that we already have) and record banana voice.

2. HISTORY OF THE UNITED FRUIT COMPANY

- a. Done as a UFCO Museum, with a tour led by two docents.
- b. Media: Reshoot remembrances of a former employee, as fake documentary. Alaister Cooke. Priest does his rabid pro-capitalist speech as an invocation. Honduras-Zemurray episode.
- c. Govt.-Fruit Co. connections.
- d. Fruit Co. P.R./Advertising. Songs?
- e. Fruit Co. later years--including the 1950 era and after the coup--could also be recalled by former employee in fake documentary.
- f. Contents of a Banana plantation.

3. DEPENDENCY

- a. Perhaps as cabaret material.

4. THE BALLAD OF GUATEMALA

- a. This tells the story of Guatemala. Song is written. Could be done live at the bar, or could be taped.

5. THE 1954 COUP IN GUATEMALA

- a. Done as a puppet show, on flight to Guatemala, as the in-flight movie. 3-D glasses? Needs to include the archival footage we already have edited, which includes the events leading up to the coup. General Somoza as the steward.

6. THE AFTERMATH

- a. As installation, which might also have a separate life as a gallery piece. Video/audio tape of Guatemalan woman describing a recent scene in which she saw her father and brother shot in the town square by govt. troops. in a confessional booth. Booth would have to be constructed. Tape needs to be made (if audio) or procured (if video).

Surrounding Information

1. ACTS AND FACTS

a. Perhaps projected on back wall of theatre. Large, like a history lesson.

2. U.S. INVASIONS IN HEMISPHERE

a. A construction, a set with a window, cut-out soldiers keep marching back and forth, as a list of U.S. invasions rolls by on a back screen and "Over There" is the accompanying music.

b. Windows on the World. Other similar situations, past and present around the world.

3. REPORTS

a. Plaster walls with the Kissinger Report, The Tower Commission Report, report of Iran-Contra Committee, The Monroe Doctrine, etc. The Monroe Doctrine as a song at the bar.

4. PUBLIC RELATIONS

a. Restage Moyers Interview with Bernays. Live actor as Bernays. Tape questions that Moyers asked.

b. Bernays speech. Already written.

5. RACISM

6. PATTERN OF GOVT IN CENTRAL AMERICA

a. Portrait Gallery of daffy dictators, with bios underneath.

7. DEMOCRACY/COMMUNISM AS SMOKESCREENS

a. Something Pavlovian. Audience member is rewarded whenever they say "democracy," and gets something bad when they say "communist." Would have to be built and operated. Possibly a bar game. Darts?

8. HISTORY OF GUATEMALA

a. How 54 coup reported in 5-10 different books--a high school text book, by U.S. press, by Fruit Co., by Latin press, My Weekly Reader, Junior Scholastic.

9. AMERICAN FAMILY

a. 50's images of family, a tape of Ozzie and Harriet, with no sound and a new sound track, Evolution in Living, consumerism.

10. A SLIDE CYCLE THAT REPEATS

a. From the banana growing process to fruit co to coup to American family and back to the banana.

11. LYING

a. Audience gets to submit the world's first lie, the world's 10 biggest liars, the world's 10 best lies, etc. Need paper and pencils.

b. Descriptions of the biology of lying, the psychology of lying, etc.

c. Closed circuit tv.

d. Propanda exploration.

12. BOTANY OF THE BANANA

a. Blow-up of drawing that we have.

13. BANANA RECIPES

a. Cooking demonstration on stage. Would need table and hot plate. Audience would be served dishes.

14. BANANA TRIVIA

a. A catch-all category--exhibit banana jewelry, phone, artifacts, bananas and Fawn Hall, bananas and condoms, Oliver North Wax Museum: Closed for Remodeling sign on a door, banana songs, poems, banana beaujolais, Robin Leach anecdotes, movie imagery.

15. VAUDEVILLE

a. Slipping on a peel, cream pie in the face, phallic imagery. Acts at bar.

16. INFO TABLE

a. For ACLA, etc. to display info.

17. BANANA EATING CONTEST, BANANA CONDOM CONTEST

18. BANANA BAR

a. With banana daquiris, banana milkshake, Banana smoothies, yellow wine, green beer

19. BANANA BOXES

20. OPEN MICROPHONE FOR ANNOUNCEMENTS, "ECHOES"

21. SOME COLLECTIVE ACTIVITIES

22. EXHIBITS OF CONFISCATED COMMUNIST ARTIFACTS (Hairdryers,

blenders)

23. HOLD OF BANANA BOAT
24. GUATEMALAN DEATH SQUAD SCENE
25. NORMANDO'S PAINTINGS AND HANGINGS
26. HANGING QUOTES
27. PRE SHOW AUDIENCE BRIEFING (WITH POP QUIZ?)
28. MUSIC VIDEO
29. THE GIFT SHOP. VERY IMPORTANT.
30. A BANANA ART SHOW.
31. A MAGIC ACT. The idea of illusion.
32. A GUIDE BOOK AND MAP, a la Disney.
33. ENTRY GATES.