

photos: Ron Levine



Guerilla culture: Filming 'Bread and Puppet' in Nicaragua

by Susan Green

Another impossibly humid January day in Managua but hardly typical as the Bread and Puppet Theatre band strutted through the narrow, dusty streets of Ciudad Sandino.

To the strains of "When the Saints Go Marching In," masses of barefoot children joined the procession as three costumed puppeteers — including troupe founder Peter Schumann dressed as Uncle Sam — danced by on 10-foot stilts.

"Are they real people?" asked one very small, very awed girl in Spanish. "How did they grow so tall?"

The young squealed with amazement and delight; smiling adults standing in the doorways of corrugated-tin roof shacks nodded approval. Dogs barked. Chickens fluttered out of the way, squawking.

And in the midst of this lively and bizarre gathering, three Gringo filmmakers (two of them Canadian) were trying to capture it all on celluloid.

Armed with a guarantee of National Film Board aid to the private sector for post-production services and a privately-raised \$19,000 budget for everything else, Montreal photographers Ron Levine and René DeCarufel of Synchronicity Productions had come to Nicaragua to film the puppet troupe's January 1985 tour in support of the Nicaraguan cause.

I was with them as co-producer, interviewer and writer (a Burlington, Vermont, journalist, I had worked with Levine on a

recently-published book, "Bread and Puppet: Stories of Struggle and Faith from Central America.")

The 18-person Bread and Puppet theatre troupe uses larger-than-life puppets, masks, stiltwalking, mime, music and dance to present contemporary political

themes. During the Vietnam years, Bread and Puppet could often be seen at the head of anti-war marches in New York, Washington, or Paris, doing poignant street-theatre with papier-mâché representations of U.S. soldiers and Southeast Asian peasants. In 1982, the troupe led an

estimated one million people from the United Nations to Central Park in New York to protest the nuclear arms race. Bread and Puppet each August hosts a two-day event called Our Domestic Resurrection Circus on its spacious Glover, Vt., farm.

This documentary however, would be a first for them. "Bread and Puppet is camera-shy", Levine observes. "They'd never before been filmed, but because of their sympathy for Nicaragua, our project was approved. They felt that it could help communicate Nicaragua's plight to the world"

So, armed with about 200 pounds of equipment, we had set off from Montreal's Dorval Airport and headed south. At first, U.S. Customs was wary of letting the Canadians proceed to Miami because the cameras — a French Eclair ACL and a Bolex — were not bonded. Nicaraguan Customs, however, waved us through without hesitation. "As soon as you tell them *Canadiense*," says Levine, "they smile and say '*Pacifica*'. Peaceful"

"There was no sign of the friends who were supposed to be meeting us at Sandino Airport in Managua," Levine recalls laughing. This came as no great surprise. He had been to Nicaragua a year earlier as a photojournalist. "I knew all about Nicaraguan Time: everything takes longer down there to accomplish. No one is ever punctual; two hours late or the next day is standard. It's another world... the Third World, to be exact. We high-pressured, efficiency-oriented foreigners undergo culture shock."



• Revolutionary art on the walls of Matagalpa; priest, poet and Nicaragua culture minister, Ernesto Cadenal

Susan Green is a Burlington, Vermont, journalist.

The small hotel where we thought we had reservations claimed never to have heard of us. It was just a few days before the inauguration of Nicaragua president-elect Daniel Ortega, so the city was full of visiting dignitaries. Managua was also teeming with *internacionalistas* — Danes, Brits, Germans, Spaniards, people from pretty much everywhere — in Nicaragua as *brigadistas* to help harvest coffee or cotton, as tourists, as adventurers, as *compañeros* expressing solidarity with the revolution.

After one funny, creepy-crawly night in the cockroach haven of a *hospidaje*, our admittedly middle-class prejudices found more familiar accommodations in a private home. That evening, contact was made with Bread and Puppet at a rousing service in a Liberation Theology church in one of Managua's poorest barrios. But attempts to film the proceedings — during which padre Uriel Molina asked "How could the American people give their

votes to a Hollywood actor who toys with us?" — were foiled by a malfunctioning mag and lack of a changing bag to reload the film. "We were still feeling jet-lag," Levine explains.

After church, we followed the puppeteers to the National Circus, in whose tent they would be rehearsing for the next few days. Although it was dark, DeCarufel tried to shoot some of the show: high-wire artists wearing tight satin pants and silver lamé shirts, clowns, contortionists, dancers and a rock band that sounded like early Beatles and sang about the 1979 Sandinista triumph with a chorus of "doo-oo-doo-doo-doo."

"The next day, we went to INCINE, the national film institute", Levine says. "They're forced to use World War II vintage 35mm cameras and film stock from Cuba. They have to make new parts for this equipment themselves. They do have, however, two state-of-the-art Italian editing tables that were donated."

Despite this and many other limitations, Nicaraguan filmmakers have produced some stunning documentaries, which they screened for their visitors. The technique was professional, the subject matter gripping. In one film, *Breaking the Silence*, a militia brigade of men and women set up a telecommunications system to link the country's Pacific and Atlantic coasts. They brave dense jungles, alligator-infested swamps, and the constant threat of attack by Contras, U.S.-backed counterrevolutionary forces based in Honduras. When the film ended, the director told the assembled viewers that 11 of the militia were among 22 killed by the Contras while harvesting coffee less than a month before.

At the first rehearsals, the U.S. puppeteers began working with some 25 Nicaraguan performers, who had been recruited to bolster their ranks. The group seemed always to be laughing and singing, thereby livening up the overcrowded bus that ferried the company around

Nicaragua. And that bus, provided by a government cultural agency, came at no small sacrifice in a country where reliable transportation and gasoline is scarce.

The show that was being rehearsed had a Liberation Theology theme, presented through the story of El Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero, assassinated by a death squad in 1980. The central figure of the performance is a 25-foot-high puppet likeness of Romero.

On Inauguration Day, everyone with the proper credentials was instructed to gather at INTERPREN, the government press office. There, a long wait was inevitable as hundreds of journalists from all over the world were processed by a bureaucracy operating on Nicaraguan Time.

"That's where we spotted Abbie Hoffman," Levine says. "It turned out he had just seen Bread and Puppet's Romero show in New York a few weeks before. And he's a legend from the same era. So we wanted to do an interview. But suddenly, it was beginning to look like the press would finally be herded off to the inauguration, which meant there wasn't much time. In less than five minutes, we set up outside and got what we needed."

Hoffman was, as usual, eloquently funny. "It's good that Bread and Puppet's in town 'cause Managua's the place to be," he quipped. "I think Nicaragua is the most exciting experiment in human living taking place on the planet."

Bread and Puppet's art, Hoffman suggested, played a major role in the struggle against the war in Vietnam and was just as vital to the current movement. "It's people-to-people, and that's the way these battles are won. We can't outspend 'em; we can't outshoot 'em. We can only outact 'em, outdance 'em and outsing 'em. We're all cultural workers essentially, if you're working for peace and justice and human rights. And they're the ones with the biggest heads."

After a tedious security search, the press was loaded on buses and taken to a reviewing stand from which to cover the inauguration at which Cuban leader Fidel Castro was the most celebrated guest. Taking his cue from the many dozens of photographers and cameramen, DeCarufel found a chair to stand on to film the ceremonies, while Levine and I took turns on sound.

"That evening, we wanted to follow Bread and Puppet to the official inaugural party," DeCarufel recalls. "They had been invited; we hadn't. We managed to pull a few strings and luck was really with us. We shouldn't have gotten in, but we did. It was like a miracle."

But, strangely, the Sandinista guards at the door didn't bother to look in our camera bags.

Within moments, we came upon Castro, who was holding forth in a small crowd. "We easily got within about two feet of him and began filming," DeCarufel recalls, laughing at the memory. "I just took out the Bolex with a 10mm lens. Castro had a Cuban television crew with him, so they had two quartz lights on. We shot 100 feet of film." Then Levine tried to use the recorder, extending the microphone towards Castro. Suddenly a bodyguard grabbed his wrist and twisted it to see what was in his hand.

Later, a puppeteer pointed out that, "For 25 years, the CIA has been trying to kill this guy and you could have blown him away just like that." Well, lucky for Fidel, we hadn't come on behalf of the CIA and there were only Sonys in those camera bags.

• Cuba's Fidel Castro chats with Nicaraguan leaders



• The walls of Matagalpa echo the Spanish Civil War's tragic cry, "They shall not pass"

It was rumoured that Castro and Ortega were planning to attend Bread and Puppet's show — a series of performances was beginning at the Gran Hotel, an earthquake and revolution-devastated ruin smack in downtown Managua — but the two leaders never did appear.

"We had decided to make the Gran Hotel shows the master track to be used throughout the films," Levine says. "The place was well-lit and we could shoot from several angles because there's a balcony that goes all around the room, even behind the stage. And future performances were going to be more of an unknown factor. We recorded the master sound-track from just above, using a shotgun mike."

The production was spectacular, with life-size puppet tigers, apes and horses prancing around the stage in a somewhat surrealistic treatment of Archbishop Romero's life and death. Added to the tale of Salvadoran suffering was a taste of Nicaraguan reality. The puppeteers had selected at random a December '84 newspaper article about a Contra massacre, in which 22 young militia men and women, en route to harvest coffee, were shot, robbed and in many cases burned alive in their trucks. Some of these people were in the film we'd seen at INCINE.

Half the performers chanted this news account, as, in counterpoint, the rest of them recited a speech by Ronald Reagan about the United States' peaceful aims in Central America.

During the week of Gran Hotel shows, Bread and Puppet was scheduled to meet with Father Ernesto Cardenal, poet, priest and minister of culture. We got to the ministry early to find a good location for the meeting, from a lighting point of view. But we were told that Cardenal had gone to the airport to pick up the incoming German publisher of his poetry books. Apparently, he'd either forgotten about the meeting or the other appointment had simply pre-empted it. Nicaraguan Time was in effect.

However, Cardenal's secretary urged the puppeteers to wait. "And wait we did," Levine says. "Then, just as Bread and Puppet was about to give up and leave, Cardenal arrived. Not only did the encounter turn out to be extremely pleasant and productive, but coincidentally, the German publisher had seen the company perform in 1969 and was a big fan. It all made for great footage."

A few days later, when Bread and Puppet played a Managua barrio called San Judas, Cardenal came and was filmed again, clearly enjoying the show. "Very revolutionary art," he commented afterwards.

The first trip out into the countryside was for a late afternoon performance in the little village of San José de Masetepe. The roads were unbelievably rutted and we got lost. The show itself — in front of a simple white-stucco church — began so late that it quickly got too dark to shoot even with high-speed film.

But there were blessings in store. Just as the giant Romero puppet was lifted into an upright position, the church bell began to ring unexpectedly. It seemed a shared moment of divine intervention.

Two elderly campesino gentlemen in the crowd were overheard discussing the meaning of one of the show's more abstract sequences. "Arte," one concluded sagely, "cultura internacionaliste."

As the troupe packed up in the dark, a local leader told Peter Schumann, "We would like to give you everything, but since we have nothing, we give you our hearts."

On a hilly cattle ranch in Boaco, the raising of the Romero puppet seemed to inspire a brilliant rainbow to arc across the sky, west to east, perfectly framing the production. "It was perfect," Levine recalls. "The sun was setting a deep red, the light was beautiful... a photographer's dream, with dark clouds behind."

After the show that night, Levine and DeCarufel followed Bread and Puppet up a steep mountainside — an hour-long trek on a tiny footpath, 40 people guided by only two flashlights. They spent the night in Las Lagunas, a small village that put on a splendid fiesta for the visitors. "There was an old record-player with dying batteries and a worn-out needle, playing scratchy records in Spanish and English," DeCarufel says. "We were fed tortillas, boiled yucca root, with a little meat and rice. We slept in a military barracks, surrounded by AK-47s."

The next day, they filmed the villagers singing and playing guitars, then shot the puppeteers making their way back down the mountain.

It was cold at night in the mountains of Matagalpa and to keep warm, the performers wrapped themselves in parts of the production: puppet's costumes, a banner bearing the show's title in Spanish, a parachute.

At the top of a steep, winding road, the puppeteers played outside to an isolated unit of militia, there to harvest coffee. They said they hadn't seen anyone from the outside world for two months. It was once again dark at showtime and the hosts could only provide one bare, hanging light bulb for illumination.

But it wasn't what was seen at this performance that counted, as much as what was heard. The militia commander, expressing the unit's gratitude for the performance, told Bread and Puppet that one element of the show really hit home for them. Seventeen of the 22 people killed in the December Contra massacre were from that very unit.

At a second Matagalpa coffee plantation, the show was rained out but not before the band played a few tunes. There were brigadistas from Colombia, Panama, El Salvador and Argentina there. In the downpour, a tall, bearded Argentine began doing a mock strip-tease to the — rather inappropriate — classic, "You are My Sunshine."

The musicians and the crowd then moved into a small shed, where brigadistas, puppeteers, militia and campesinos from several nations danced for about an hour.

For just a little while, all were safe from the storm and the war outside.

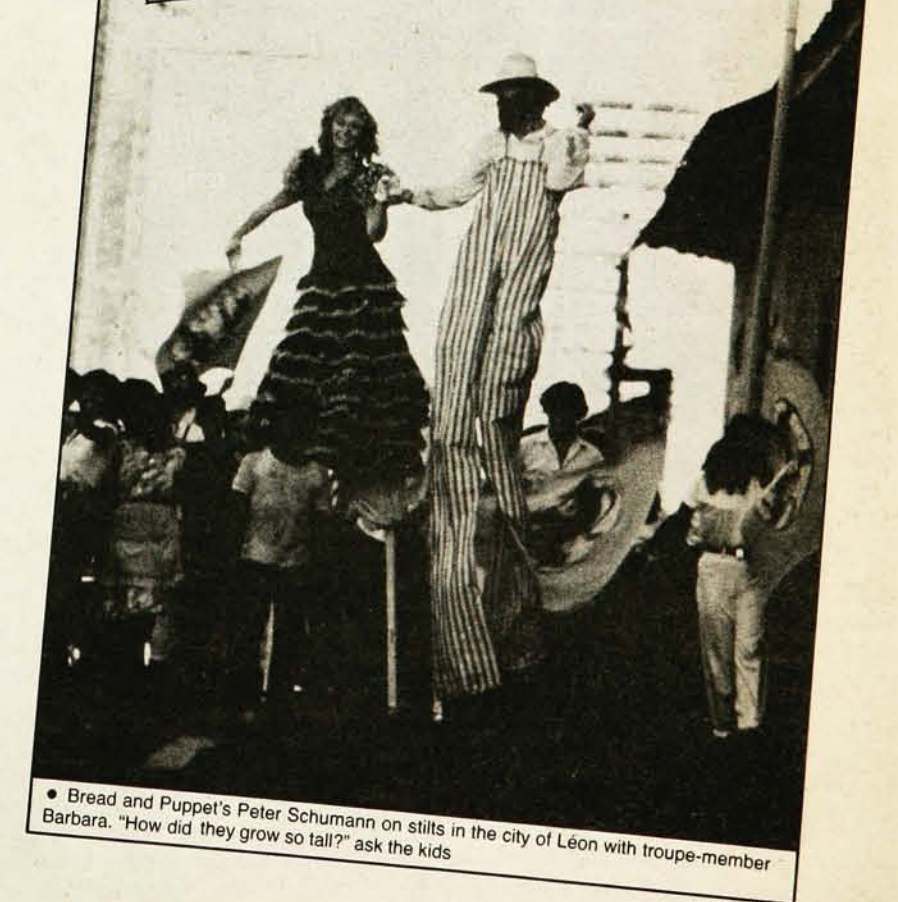
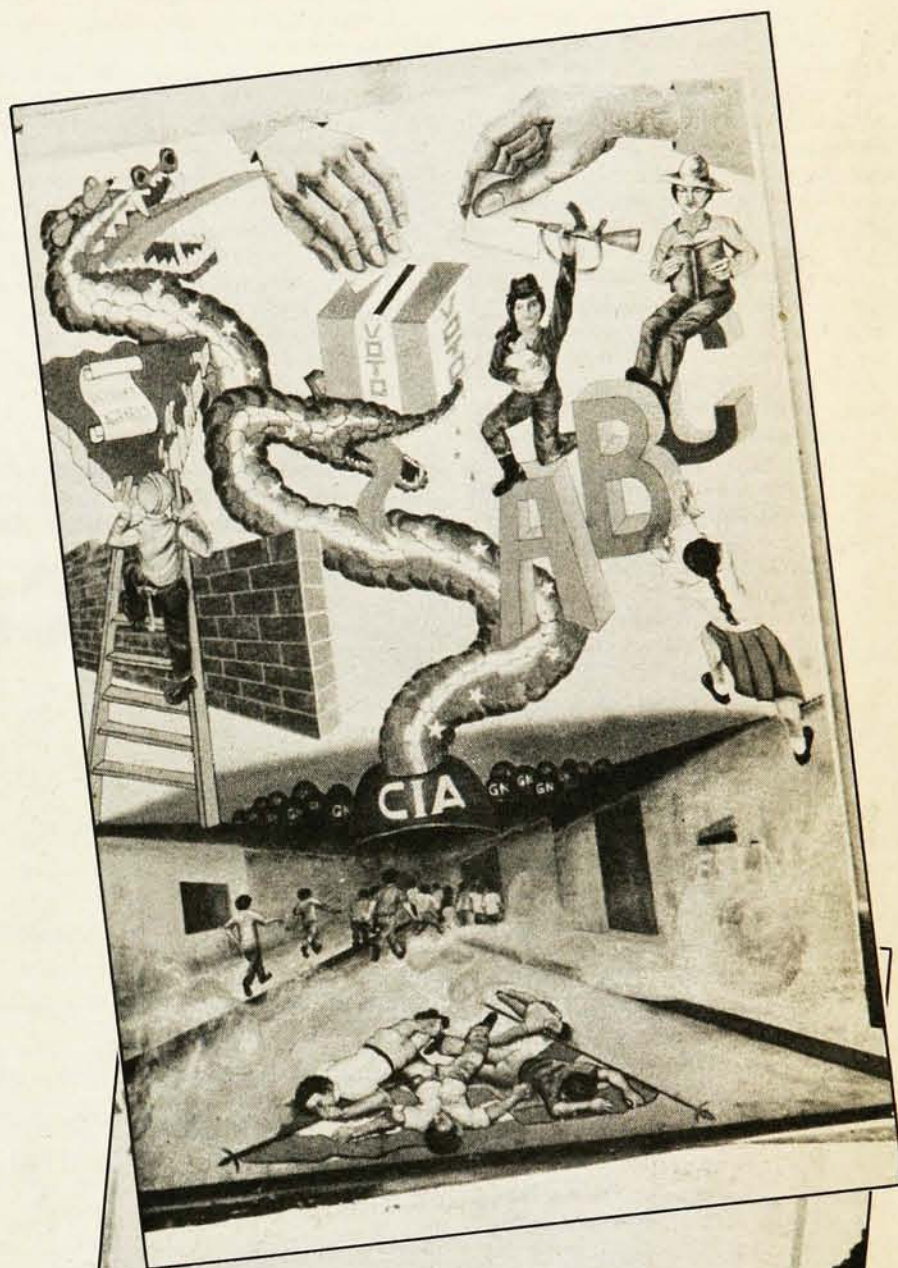
Yet that war continues to intensify, with Nicaragua living under the constant threat of U.S. invasion.

Inspired by their three-week Central American sojourn, Bread and Puppet dedicated the summer 1985 Domestic Resurrection Circus to the Nicaraguan theme.

And, back in Canada, John Brooke of Torontom who directed and edited *Québec Eté Danse '82*, is currently cutting 12,500 feet of Nicaragua footage in Levine and DeCarufel's Montreal studio.

An interlock version of the as-yet untitled one-hour documentary should be available for viewing in the Market of the World Film Festival. "We hope to have the final version ready for the Festival International du Nouveau Film in November," Levine says. "And with any luck, we should be able to bring a copy, as promised, down to Managua in December."

That is, unless the post-production goes on Nicaraguan Time.



• Bread and Puppet's Peter Schumann on stilts in the city of León with troupe-member Barbara. "How did they grow so tall?" ask the kids