



Oaxaca Times

VOLUME XVII NO 182 A GLANCE AT LIFE IN OAXACA • JANUARY 2004 www.oaxacatimes.com

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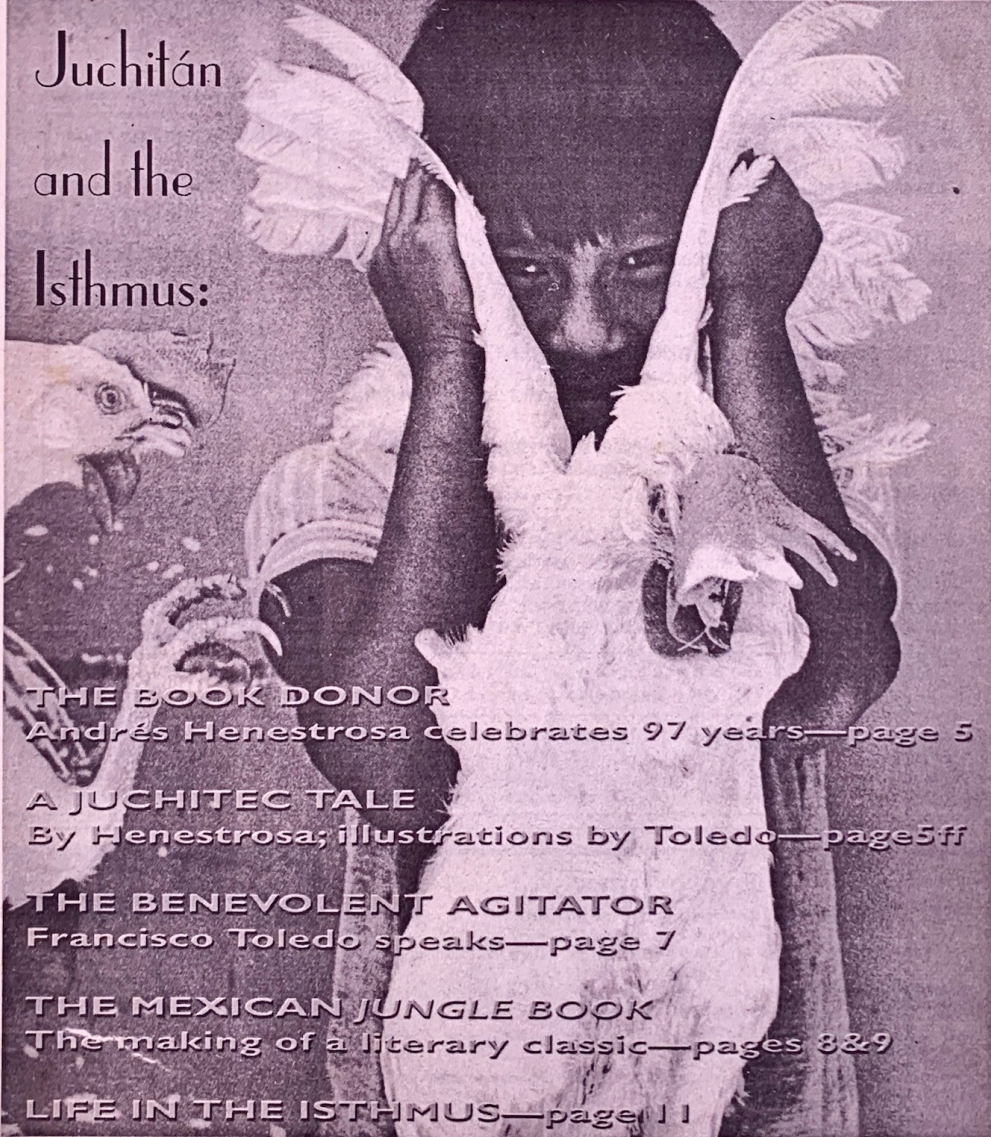
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The benevolent agitator

Oaxaca's favorite son faces a dilemma: stay in the city and help the community or get out of Dodge and indulge his muse? Whichever, the Francisco Toledo legend is secure.

By JAMES BLACKMAN

FRANCISCO Toledo is sitting for breakfast in an elegant downtown restaurant where the waiters call him *maestro* and fill his coffee cup without being asked twice. "Oaxacan people are known as *grillos* (the Zapotec word for crickets), because we eat grasshoppers and are troublemakers and can't sit still," he says, rocking forward, beaming a smile from a hatch of gray whiskers. "I can be considered a *grillo* because I am looking for alternatives for people."

Toledo is not sitting particularly still. Between bites of his *molete*, he gives himself wiry, gripping bear hugs. Stillness is not a luxury he is afforded much anymore. Already this early morning, he has appeared sprightly across the courtyard and talked excitedly about Mario Vargas Llosa's latest. Books are clearly a passion for him—he is the driving force behind the Francisco Burgoa Rare Books Library, the Jorge Luis Borges Library for the Blind and is now working to bolster library resources in the prison of Oaxaca.

Toledo's projects invariably seek to demystify the elitist arts, kept from the common man in galleries and museums. "Lower income people are often intimidated by cultural centers," he explains. "They think they are for the rich and well-dressed. We are trying to change this." Admission is free to all the institutions Toledo has helped establish, among them the MACO Contemporary Arts Museum, the IAGO Graphic Arts Center and the classic film theatre, El Pochote.

Contrary to popular belief, Toledo was actually born in Mexico City, the son of a shoemaker in 1940. It was a brief sojourn in the capital however, as he was whisked to Juchitán after a few days, where he spent his formative years. He studied art in Mexico City and Paris, and is represented in galleries and private collections across the world. But, with all his community work, 'Mexico's greatest living artist,' as he is dubbed by the national press, hardly has time to paint anymore.

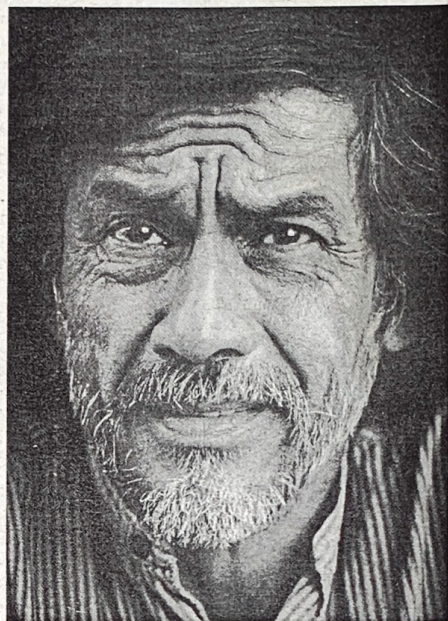
The financial impetus for the library project and the new arts center in San Augustin Etla is shared by Toledo and the federal government. The administrative slack, in searching relevant resources is taken up by Toledo

alone. In total, through all his projects, he has 130 workers that depend on him for their work and wage. He pays them from the interest he receives on his private income, which is some indication of his clout as a painter. Toledo divides his time between family, administrative duties and public appearances. He finds time to read in the morning and paint in the afternoon, but says that Oaxaca, and the demands it makes on him, stifle his muse as an artist: "I have been trying to do too much. I am a painter and don't want to be the patron of this or the director of that and here and there, and involved in all these projects."

Oaxaca itself is the cause of his restlessness, his political inquietude and drive for social improvement. Oaxaca has a history of sacred reformers and military firebrands, of tough leaders driven by the extreme poverty of the land. And while it now seems to frustrate him, it is essential to his art at the same time. Toledo has spent long periods away from Oaxaca, in Los Angeles and New York, and considers returning north to enable himself the kind of quiet that may fan his creativity. But it was in France in his twenties that he discovered Mexico and sustaining inspiration. Paris, at the time, was a place of racial tension, caught between the war with Algeria and the race riots that lit the streets at the end of the 1960s.

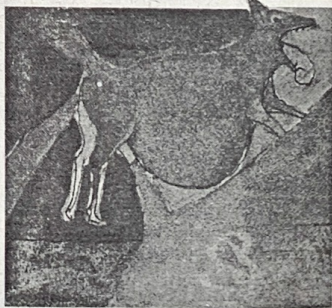
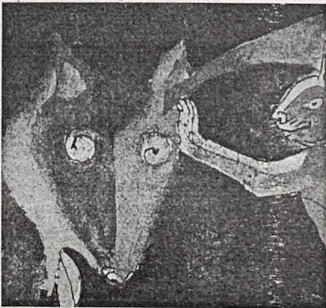
"I felt lonely at times and I was the victim of racism. But for my artistic development, the galleries and museums and trips to neighboring countries were very important. It's the same for everybody—by leaving you discover what you left behind. For me (in Paris), I did not just discover Mexico, but also my home, Juchitán."

By all accounts, Juchitán is *grillo*-country—a Zapotec center known for its liberal



attitudes and strong political views. Benito Juarez ordered its burning because of its rebelliousness. Toledo's portraits of Juarez, Oaxaca's supreme statesman, ice-skating and watching the girls go by in New Orleans, sought some recompense for Juarez's pyromaniac dreams of Juchitán. Toledo carried this disregard for reputations doggedly into the recent burger/tamale war, in which he led a march and petition that saw the mayor of Oaxaca backtrack on a decision to allow McDonald's permission to build on the city's 16th century *zócalo*.

Toledo's duality, his schizophrenic career as a painter and social worker, comes from the *grillo* attitudes bred into him by his native Oaxaca. He explains away his altruism: "It's got nothing to do with my heart—just my hand. It's a little bit like orange juice," he says, gesturing to the breakfast table. "I have three glasses of orange juice, say, and I'm going to take one for myself. What am I going to do with the others?"



Coyote arrived at the lake after Rabbit. "I'm going to eat you," he told Rabbit. "Very well," said Rabbit, "but first let's have some cheese." And he showed him the moon, which had cast its glow upon the water. "First let's drink the whey until it's all dry—and then the cheese is ours." One beside the other, they leaned to drink. But Rabbit only drank a few drops, bending over to pretend. Coyote drank until he began to leak water. "Plug me up," he told Rabbit.

Rabbit went for leaves and twisted them into a plug. "I want to stay 'til he explodes," thought Rabbit and plugged his eyes and nostrils until his leaks were stopped. It was only a matter of time before Coyote exploded. The water stretched his skin until it burst. "I've tricked you again," said Rabbit, and disappeared. Coyote was sick for days and seen by no one but the flies in his den. A plan of revenge rushed about his head until he got dizzy. PAGE 8

Andrés Henestrosa grew up a fatherless, Zapotec-speaking Juchitec. Then he sold his horse, got on a train, learnt Spanish, changed pulque for wine and wrote a bonafide Mexican classic.



Photo by James Blackburn

By CARLA ZAREBSKA

ANDRÉS Henestrosa left Juchitán when he was 16 years old. His mother, Tina Man, had urged him into accepting the challenge: "Better yourself, go see the world, study, be somebody." The boy, indigenous and fatherless, severed the threads with his childhood when he sold his horse at the train station. "Caressing its mane, its haunches, its tail," he wrote in *Portrait Of My Mother*. "I leaned my forehead on its neck and wept. And its neigh, like a handkerchief, billowed a while in the air."

He arrived in Mexico City with a pillow slip for a suitcase, two sets of clothes, 30 pesos in his pocket and a towel that doubled as a scarf when it got cold. In the capital, he made it his task to meet the dean of the National University, José Vasconcelos, and in his precarious Spanish he was able to get hold of an interpreter to tell him: "I'm here on account of you because you said in the newspapers that when the Revolution triumphed, there would be education for the poor, the orphaned and the Indians. I believed you, so I hope you don't turn out to be a liar."

It was February 1923, and the scholarship had been awarded three months before and the budget for students had been spent. But Vasconcelos had been troubled by the word "liar," and sought to enroll the student at the Teacher's Training School. Henestrosa hadn't even finished school, but that was the only way Vasconcelos could help him. He gave him some classics like *The Iliad*, *The Divine Comedy*, *The Odyssey*, *Faust* and a children's edition of *Don Quixote*.

"I understood very little or almost nothing from those book," says Henestrosa. "I could barely speak Spanish. But nothing of what you don't understand is completely lost. You'll understand it tomorrow. Ignorance is the mother of wisdom."

By 1924, Vasconcelos was no longer the tutelary father of Mexican culture. A year and a half as director of the University followed by a brief period at the Secretariat of Public Education had left an unprecedented cultural impact on Mexico: he promoted books and reading by setting up new libraries; he federalized public education; he sponsored and promoted the muralist movement and incorporated radio broadcasting into his educational projects. Henestrosa was one of thousands of students to feel, both in body and soul, the absence of José Vasconcelos.

Hard years followed. But new guidance soon

arrived: he had become friends with the painter Manuel Rodríguez Lozano and thanks to him he met Antonieta Rivas Mercado.

"I would like to help Andrés but I don't know how," she said to Manuel. "Well be careful because if he finds out you feel sorry for him you'll never see him come by again in your life," he responded. But that woman was extremely intelligent and one day she said to me: "Niño, where do you go after school?" I told her I went to my boarding house but that was a lie because I slept at a movie theater. She knew this and very discreetly said to me: "I need someone to help me collect the rent from my tenants. Why don't you do it?" It was in this way that she offered me work—and discreetly, a meal. After a few months, she made me another offer: "There are two empty beds in my house—the one my brother just left after getting married, and the one my father left when he dies. Choose any of the two bedrooms and sleep there. I'm busy in the day, but if you sleep over I'll have time to read to you at night."

And that's the way it was each evening after dinner. Antonieta translated out loud to him from English into Spanish (Blake, Kipling, Yeats, O'Neill) but also from German (Rilke, Kafka), Italian and French. They would read until midnight.

"That's how I went from using a simple cloak to pressed Dutch sheets that crackled when I got into bed," explains Henestrosa. "I went from *guarache* sandals to moccasins; from denim to English cashmere; from pulque, or fermented cactus nectar, to wine; from tortilla to bread; from *tepache*, or pineapple cider, to champagne."

Henestrosa was introduced to certain refinements thanks to Antonieta Rivas Mercado. But more importantly, it was this woman who thoroughly opened the world of literature to him. From that time onward Henestrosa knew that it was his vocation to be a writer. He lived in her home from the end of 1927 to the beginning of 1929. On one of those nights of reading came the idea of writing *A Nation Scattered By The Dance*. Henestrosa had been very impressed by *The Jungle Book* by Rud-

the life and times of

ANDRÉS HENESTROSA



It was noon when Coyote arrived at the Pitaya tree in whose branches sat his enemy. "Get down here, there's no escape for you now," Coyote told Rabbit. "Don't be a fool," said Rabbit. "Don't you want to eat some Pitaya fruit? Now close your eyes and open your mouth."



Rabbit threw Coyote two peeled Pitaya fruits, but the third was still bristled with thorns, making Coyote cry out in pain. He opened his eyes and saw Rabbit scampering off, proud that he had tricked Coyote a third time. Coyote stained the ground as he left with the blood that gushed from his throat. Early the next morning he scoured the entire mountain in search of Rabbit.

yard Kipling, with *The Black Decameron* by Leo Frobenius, but especially with the 14-volume collection of *The Distant Muses*, featuring myths from countries as remote as Egypt, China, Germany, India, Malaysia, France, Russia and Poland.



"After reading these books," says Henestrosa, "I said to myself: 'The legends and myths that I heard in my childhood are just like these,' and I began the task of writing a book that would contain a part of what until that time had been preserved in Juchitán as an oral tradition. I mentioned my project to Antonieta and since I had only been learning Spanish for a couple of years, she offered to transcribe what I dictated."

The day Henestrosa turned 23, on November 30, 1929, the first printed copy of *A Nation Scattered By The Dance* was handed to him. The book contained a portrait of the young

Henestrosa and two other drawings by Rodríguez Lozano. Antonieta paid for the edition—200 copies sold at a peso each.

"At the time, Mexican authors copied the styles of foreign writers, particularly the English and French," remembers Henestrosa. "And this bastard suddenly appears writing about Indians. Where the hell did this upstart get off thinking he could talk about the Indians when everyone else was talking about Jean Cocteau, André Breton, Jules Supervielle, the breaks with the past...my God! So my book was not well received by the literary world in vogue at the time but rather by men of science and the old-fashioned literati. They really praised the book. I was one of the first to speak of an indigenous literature—before Father Garibay and when Léon-Portilla was four years old."

In 1936, Henestrosa was awarded a Guggenheim to elaborate a Zapotec-Spanish dictionary and to recover the meaning of Zapotec culture within the context of Mesoamerica.

"You can speak 20 languages if you like," says Henestrosa, "but the mother tongue is the one you dream in, the one you think in, the one you weep with, the one you swear with. I'm certainly bilingual because I received the Zapotec language from my mother's right bosom, and the Huavé lan-

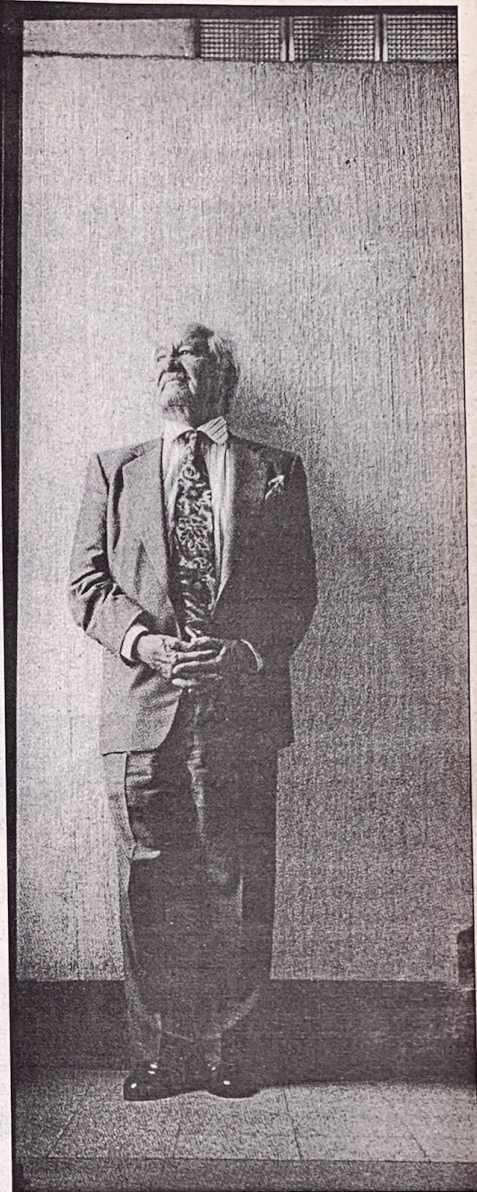
guage from her left bosom. And other languages from other bosoms..."

At 97, Henestrosa possesses an enviable clarity, he has resolve and health, he thinks, he gives his opinion, he believes, he resists, he fails to believe, he laughs, he eats to his heart's delight: "carrion and everything that upsets other people's stomachs." And he drinks without fear of getting drunk. He never drinks water and never in his life has he done any exercise. On one occasion I tried following his habits an entire day, and the result was a terrible case of indigestion, two hours in bed and a headache. Meanwhile, he continued dining with his friends and a bottle of red wine.

Some years ago Henestrosa bought a small house in Tlacoahuaya, a small town situated in the valley of Tlacolula, with one of the most spectacular Dominican churches in all of Oaxaca. The first thing Henestrosa does on entering his house is to place flowers at a tiny altar to Alfa, his deceased wife. He checks that everything is in order, he asks them to hang his hammocks—and then he rests. That's his secret to staying fit: his short siestas.

One day I went with him to Tlacoahuaya and I watched him as he took a siesta in his hammock. I realized how he continues to be the child he longs for, the child he remembers. A child that has refused to leave his body: sitting in his hammock, he briskly pushed himself with a foot. Then he laid down to wait for the rocking motion to envelope him. He used his arm as a pillow. His sleep was peaceful and identical to that of any child. I never heard an uncouth snore out of him.

Before falling asleep, he asked me: "Have you ever been to Juchitán?" "Yes," I replied. "Then you have already been to Athens," he said.



Facing page, top: Andrés Henestrosa at his velo-style, 97th birthday celebration in Tlacoahuaya, Oaxaca, November 30, 2003. Above: Portrait of Henestrosa by Graciela Iturbide, 1995. Photo by Graciela Iturbide



Before his fatigue got the better of his anger, Coyote came face to face with Rabbit. Rabbit had already seen Coyote and before he arrived he ran to the foot of a hill and put his paw against a boulder. As Coyote arrived, Rabbit said: "If I let go of this rock, the whole world will fall on us." Coyote pulled back, his eyes trembled and he believed Rabbit's lie.



Not only that, but having been invited to help, he offered his free hand. Rabbit let go, saying he was tired, and told Coyote: "I'll look for rope to hold the rock back."



Rabbit tied not only the rock, but Coyote as well. He tied the rope to a tree and left without trace. When Coyote realized he had been tricked, he chewed the rope and, with more fury than ever, swore never to be tricked again.