



### ***6 Actions / 3 Artists: Fort San Lorenzo, Portobelo, Panama***

Written and Performed during the  
2013 Summer Taller Portobelo Artist Residency, Portobelo, Panama

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Performers: Oronike Odeleye, Angelica Allen, Masud Olufani

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#### **General Description and Outline:**

It is important to me as well as the other artists in collaboration on this performance piece to work from a historical perspective. All of the forts in Portobelo, Panama are still under the control of Spain, are poorly maintained, and seem to carry a strange aura in the midst of this area. A complex dynamic exists between the local residents and the forts. Fort San Lorenzo and the other historical landmarks bring in a great deal of tourism and in turn capital for the town. Yet, what remains is the painful reminder of how many of their ancestors were brought to Portobelo as slaves. Thus, considering what to do for a performance piece in the fort is difficult at best. What is clear, though not directly addressed in

all I found in my research, is the establishment of the fort from the start is a perfect example of colonialism. So this is where I land as I write.

In writing for making performance in a particular space I am compelled to approach a space and idea with considerable research, thought, respect, and understanding. Performance can be narrative or purely conceptual. What seems to be necessary in writing for a piece that will be made in Fort San Lorenzo is a combination of these two approaches.

Each of the artists will perform their own performance piece within the confines of the fort. In order to make a unified and responsible work of art we have decided to focus on the basic fact that Fort San Lorenzo exists purely as a truth of colonialism. People from outside the community forcefully claimed land, community, gold, treasures, resources and enslaved local residents as well as others for their own purposes and gain. The performers will make actions both within an enclosed space (looks like a storage space or church) at the base of the fort as well as up on top of the nearby hill where there is an open space of the fort. Each space will call for a specific and unique action done by each artist.

Each artist will spend some thoughtful time in Fort San Lorenzo prior to (a day or two before) the performance in order to gather a sense of the space as well as themselves in the space. It is pertinent that each artist focus on the issues of colonialism in general as well as its specific impact in Portobelo, Panama. When developing their ideas each artist is to be mindful that the piece they will be making for Fort San Lorenzo involves their reaction to the space and its existence in Portobelo rather than an invented interpretation of the history of the fort; not negating the need to tap into their imaginations. All actions are to be performed intentionally with ownership and whole heart. Actions may be frenetic or graceful, motionless or with full body engagement. The use of audio/sound is to be considered – most particularly in the enclosed space as the acoustics are of artistic interest.

At dusk (5 or 5:30pm) artists will all begin in the enclosed space; they may initiate their action at any point in time. Each action could be occurring simultaneously or in isolation. No discussions need to be made regarding when one another's pieces will be introduced. What does need to be decided is who will be first and last to move from the enclosed space up the hill to the open fort space. One by one artists will walk up the hill...they might decide to follow immediately behind or minutes later. Another important factor to consider in the movement up the hill is that this movement is part of the performance. Each artist will decide whether she/he will walk slowly or run, crawl, or a combination of actions.

Once up in the open space each artist will perform another work apropos to that space. Artists might decide to make an action that is a variation of the work done

in the enclosed space down the hill or a new and unique piece. Sitting in a corner is considered an action. Yelling is also considered an action. Speaking out their own words or quotes memorized could be appropriate actions. Artists might decide to make collaborative actions or not. Actions might be short (5 minutes or less) or long (up to 30 minutes). Whatever the case may be if an artist chooses to make a short piece he/she will wait for the last person to finish their performance piece in the open space. If an artist completes their action performance before others have completed their pieces she/he will walk to the "exit" of the upper level space and wait until the last person has ended her/his action. The three artists will exit the top level of the fort when everyone has completed their piece. They will walk down the steps of the hill single file one right after the other almost as if in a unit.

End Action occurs when they all have exited Fort San Lorenzo at the bottom of the hill outside of the entrance completely.

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### **Some History: Fort San Lorenzo, Portobelo, Panama.**

The fort was built in the 1590's on a steep cliff overlooking the mouth of the Chagres River to protect the Atlantic terminus of the Las Cruces Trail. This was the route on which much of the plunder of the Incas and Peruvian gold and silver mines was transported to Spain. The mouth of the Chagres was a strategic point as it was directly across from Panama City at the narrowest strip of the isthmus. From the city, half of the trail led to the town of Venta de Cruces and the rest of the trip could be taken by boat on the river. The Las Cruces Trail was primarily used during the rainy season while the overland route, the Camino Real, was usually taken during the dry season.

Fort San Lorenzo was taken three times during its storied history. Sir Francis Drake had raided along the Spanish Main back in 1572 and in 1595 he had his eyes set on sacking Panama Viejo as the capstone to his remarkable career. After taking the nearby town of Nombre de Dios, Drake attacked and sacked both the fort and town of Chagres. At that time, the fort was constructed of wooden palisades and had deteriorated in the tropical rain. Drake sent 850 men up the river and advanced until they found a heavily fortified fortress at Venta de Cruces. The men were forced to retreat and find less well defended targets. This ended up being Drake's final expedition as shortly thereafter, he died of tropical disease and was buried at sea in a lead coffin near Drakes Island off of Portobello. Two of Drake's ships were reportedly discovered in late 2011, but his coffin has yet to be found.

In 1668, Sir Henry Morgan attacked and sacked Portobelo. He was able to loot the town and ransom off many of its inhabitants for a handsome sum. At the time, the Governor of Panama sent him an emerald ring and a letter requesting that he not attack Panama Viejo. Morgan replied by sending the Governor a pistol and a message that he intended to come to Panama and reclaim it from him. (RECLAIM?) Three years later, Morgan returned and successfully stormed Fort San Lorenzo. His men killed 300 of the 323 men in the garrison, spiked the cannons, and burnt the fort to the ground. Morgan followed Drake's original route with 1,400 men and was able to plunder Panama Viejo. Although Panama was at the time the richest city in New Spain, Morgan and his men obtained far less booty than they had expected as much of the city's wealth had been removed onto a Spanish ship in the bay or destroyed by fire. Following the sack of Panama, Morgan was arrested for violating the 1670 peace treaty between England and Spain. At his trial, Morgan was able to prove that he had no knowledge of the treaty and instead of being punished he was knighted and given the post of Lieutenant Governor of Jamaica.

Fort San Lorenzo was rebuilt in 1680 with stone instead of wood and successfully guarded the Caribbean coast for 60 years. The next major action took place during the War of Jenkin's Ear. The incident that gave its name to the war occurred in 1731 off the coast of Florida when a British brig was boarded by a Spanish patrol boat. The Spanish captain accused the brig's captain, Robert Jenkins, of smuggling and cut off his left ear. He supposedly told Jenkins to "Go and tell your King that I will do the same, if he dares to do the same." Jenkins later told his story and presented his severed ear to Parliament, which immediately voted to declare war. Vice Admiral Edward Vernon (of whom George Washington named Mount Vernon) was dispatched to the Caribbean in 1740 to attack Spanish holdings in New Spain. The fleet first attacked Antigua, captured Portobelo, and attacked Cartagena before arriving at Fort San Lorenzo. The fort was lightly defended by 30 men and two patrol boats which were no match for four ships-of-the-line and a frigate. After two days, the fort was surrendered and subsequently destroyed.

In 1761 the fort was rebuilt yet again, but its strategic importance diminished as the Spanish had largely abandoned both of the old trails over the isthmus, preferring to sail around the tip of South America at Cape Horn. Following independence from Spain in 1821, the fort was used as a prison for over a century. The Gold Rush of 1849 led to a resurgence of the importance of the Chagres as '49ers used the river to cross the isthmus on the way to California. This rebirth was short-lived with the completion of the Panama Railway in 1855. The construction of Gatun Dam in 1914 permanently sealed off the river from inland trade. In 1916, the 500 remaining inhabitants of the town of Chagres were resettled about 8 miles away. In 1980, Fort San Lorenzo together with Portobelo, were declared UNESCO World Heritage Sites under the name



“Fortifications on the Caribbean Side of Panama” as magnificent examples of the defense system built by the Spanish to protect transatlantic trade.

Research Resources:

<http://www.sanlorenzo.org.pa/content/blogcategory/14/27/lang,en/>

<http://militaryhistory.about.com/od/battleswars16011800/p/jenkinsear.htm>

<http://viragoslog.blogspot.com/2011/08/fort-etude-fuerte-san-lorenzo-colon.html>

