Colombia has over 100 indigenous communities speaking approximately 80 surviving languages: of these the Emberá are the third largest indigenous community (Bushnell & Hudson, 2010). Traditionally living in rural and remote locations, thousands of indigenous Colombians have been internally displaced due to the widespread armed conflict between guerillas of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia/Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the Ejército de Liberación Nacional/National Liberation Army (ELN), drug cartels and the Colombian army over the last fifty years (Bushnell & Hudson, 2010; Merkx, 2013; Rodríguez & Mota, 2012; UNHCR, 2008). Such displacement often leads to loss of culture and language and a breakdown in traditional structures (Pagonis, 2004). In addition, violence and human rights abuses against indigenous populations are widespread (UNHCR, 2008). The result is that many indigenous groups are at risk of disappearing (Pagonis, 2005; UNCHR, 2008).

In response to this imminent loss, playwright and director Carolina Ribón founded the Hamuy Munakuy Foundation, a not-for-profit arts organisation established to 'strengthen the ancestral wisdom of indigenous communities in Colombia using the arts as a tool for dissemination and outreach'. The Foundation seeks to bridge the gap between urban and indigenous communities. Her play, entitled ‘(…)’ Homenaje a las Mujeres Emberá - Chami, was the first mounted by the Foundation and explores the implicit theatricality in rituals of Colombia’s indigenous peoples.

Kate MacNeill is the editor of the Asia Pacific Journal of Arts and Cultural Management and met Carolina Ribón at the AIMAC conference in Bogotá in June 2013. AIMAC is a biennial conference of academics working in the arts and cultural management sector. The conference is always stimulating and hosted in such a way as to introduce delegates to arts and cultural institutions and practices in the host city. In Bogotá, this included a visit to Museo del Oro (the Gold Museum) where exquisite example of artefacts and objects were on display, many of these objects playing important roles in the culture of the indigenous peoples of Colombia and surrounding countries. For some, this begged the question as to how these artefacts came to be in the museum, and indeed what were the current conditions in which Colombian indigenous peoples lived. An opportunity arose to explore this and other issues when, in her capacity as a delegate to the conference, Carolina Ribón energetically promoted the current cultural concerns of indigenous people. After the conference Kate took the opportunity to contact Carolina for this interview.

KM: What led you to be involved in a theatre practice with members of the indigenous community?

CR: As a Colombian artist I felt the necessity of using theatre to generate social and cultural changes. In Colombia there are 102 indigenous communities and 34 of them are going to disappear because of the armed conflict, so I thought that theatre would be a good way to try to show to the people of the city everything that is going to be
lost if we don’t do something about it. Indigenous cultural knowledge has been rejected, overshadowed by western society and Colombians are no longer able to recognise themselves within indigenous heritage, so through theatre I want us to feel once again proud of what we are.

Indigenous peoples needed, and still need, to make visible how their human rights are not being respected because they deserve to live as indigenous people and not as westerners do. With my work, along with their stories, I wanted to share with Colombians the cultural richness that we own and need to protect. Theatre can entertain but also educate, I think, and that is why I created a non-profit organisation called Hamuy Munakuy.

KM: How did the process of the play evolve and what was the role of the indigenous women in the development of the play?

CR: I wrote the play, whose name is not a word but a symbol, the symbol of silence (…), without thinking of indigenous women being involved, but then I started to realise that the story I wrote was very similar to what has been happening to the Emberá Chamí women. So what I did was start sharing time with the indigenous women that work selling their handcrafts in the street, learning about their life stories. I noticed that in 13 years of being forced to leave their ancestral territories by FARC, nobody listened to their problems and concerns. They were invisible to the people of the city. Everyone silenced their fight for their human rights. I wanted then not only to show their cultural heritage, but also to be the platform so they were finally heard and able to be recognised as victims that deserve to be re-dignified.

KM: What Festivals was it performed at? Can you describe the Festivals, the venues and the audiences that came to see the play?

CR: We have been called to various festivals in Bogotá and Colombia, like Festival de teatro de Bogotá o Festival Mujeres en escena por la paz. We have also been called by the Historic Memory National Institute to perform our plays. People are surprised when the play is finished because a lot of them had never been near indigenous people or are not aware at all of their problems. We always receive mail thanking us for giving them the opportunity to enjoy a play while they are learning about our indigenous cultures. People that do theatre in Colombia like our plays because although they have a political aspect we always care a lot about the aesthetics of the play, we are theatre people after all, the only difference is that we use it to defend our indigenous people’s human rights.

KM: What opportunities exist in Colombia for audiences to experience the culture of the indigenous community? And for the indigenous community to practice its culture?

CR: For indigenous people in Colombia it is very difficult to practice their culture because of the armed conflict. Thirty-four of the 102 cultures that exist in Colombia are going to disappear soon if we don’t do anything about it. This is because they are forced to leave behind their ancestral territories and start living in the big cities because where they used to live is very dangerous now. In the cities it is impossible to keep traditions alive because they need to find a way to live with dignity.

There are not enough channels that allow people to experience the culture of indigenous people; it is like they don’t even exist, unless you work with them. That is why we have been successful in our objective and people go to our plays – because it is a way of learning about them in the city itself. The only place people can go to know something about indigenous people is in the Museo del Oro, which I personally don’t like because they talk about indigenous people as though they don’t exist anymore, as if they are something of the past, while at the entrance door you have indigenous women selling their handcrafts because they have to eat.
References