

Latin America/Chile

Sea Martyrs of San Antonio

Out-of-work women encarnadoras (hook baiters) in Chile take up acting and win wide acclaim

This article has been compiled by Brian O’Riordan from various sources, including the Conapach website (<http://www.conapach.cl/>)

A play written and performed by 11 artisanal fisherwomen from San Antonio and Valparaíso, first staged in 2004, has recently made a comeback in Chile’s Vth Region, thanks to the support from the Regional Government of Valparaíso.

The play, *Women, the Embodiment of Abundance*, depicts the story of San Antonio over the last 40 years, from times of abundance to the current harsh realities faced by the artisanal fishing sector. The women have gathered together anecdotes, legends, and life experiences, and show how the catch quotas now set under the fisheries law have deprived women of their work.

According to Maria Teresa Olivera, the play’s director, “We want to tell people about the work that we used to do, to make women’s work in the sector—not previously known in this country—visible. The play is based on real-life stories taken from the book *Women in Artisanal Fisheries* by Michele Alarcón. It looks at the process of artisanal fishing from a woman’s perspective: male work has always been recognized, but the thankless women’s tasks of baiting the hooks, essential for catching the sea’s bounty, have been ignored.”

The play is currently (October/November 2006) touring theatres in Chile’s Vth Region, but its producers have put forward a much more ambitious proposal: to develop a nationwide tour. They have applied for support from the National Culture and Arts Council, the Fisheries Subsecretariat, and various fishermen’s organizations countrywide, in order to realize their project ‘Women forging networks...from San Antonio throughout Chile’. They hope to initiate this before the year-end and to continue through the whole of 2007. Maria Teresa Olivera asserts: “The project has been successful in demonstrating the important cultural rescue work that is being done to

get such unique and unknown practices as hook-baiting recognized”.

It was in 2004 that 11 women from the Encarnadoras Union Mártires del Mar de San Antonio (Sea Martyrs of San Antonio), with no previous acting experience, won a National Culture and Arts Council (Fondart) award. This enabled them to participate in the “Theatre of the Sea and Fishing Theatre Workshops with Artisanal Fisherwomen”. It involved five months of hard work, including acting and theory classes, which inspired them to create the play.

When people talk about artisanal fishing, they only tend to think about the fishermen who put out to sea every day, risking their lives in order to feed their families. However, if men are to go to sea, thousands of anonymous women must prepare the fishing trip at home, putting the bait on the hooks; a scene that is replicated in other spheres of economic activity: for men to work, women must take care of the domestic tasks and childcare, work that is not recognized by society.

“To begin with, we were very scared of failing, but, with hard work, we achieved our objectives of making the situation of women in artisanal fishing known, which had been invisible for so long,” recalls Viviana Cornejo, one of the actresses in the play, a representative of the Sea Martyrs Encarnadoras Union of San Antonio, and a member of Conapach’s Women’s Union Committee.



Another of the actresses and former *encarnadora* is Miriam Almonacid. Several years ago, when the resources depleted, she had to leave her work of baiting hooks. Since then, she has been working in the Valparaiso municipal programme for employment generation. Miriam says that acting in the play “is like stepping back in time, reminding me of when I learned hook-baiting, and how difficult it was at first. I did not like it because it pricked my fingers and everything stank, but, over time, I realized that this work allowed me to meet people and to earn good money. As far as supporting the struggles of the sector is concerned, this play provides some useful ammunition that allows us to say things that we could not otherwise say, that is, that artisanal fishermen’s continued existence depends entirely on hook-baiters continuing their work of preparing the trip so that the men can continue putting out to sea.”

In San Antonio alone there are at least 800 *encarnadoras*, and it is estimated that in Chile around 10,000 women live, or rather used to live, from this work; all belong to the informal sector, so they do not even have the basic rights historically gained by women, like maternity leave, social security, healthcare, etc.

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