



'What Unites Us Is Violence'

An exclusive interview with Chile's performance group LasTesis, whose global feminist anthem resonates around the world

IT WAS PAULA COMETA WHO FOUND THE DOLLS: FOUR BARBIE-size felt figurines dressed in red overalls like the women in the famous Chilean group LasTesis (“The Theses”) whom they’d been made to resemble.

Fame had come for Cometa, Daffne Valdés, Sibila Sotomayor and Lea Cáceres in 2019 with their performance of “Un Violador en Tu Camino” (“A Rapist in Your Path”), an anthem that called out the patriarchy for victim-blaming and denying justice for survivors of sexual assault and rape. The lyrics and the group’s dance moves have since been performed hundreds of times around the world. And in 2020, LasTesis made *Time* magazine’s list of the 100 most influential people in the world. Yet the street vendor who sold the dolls to Cometa didn’t recognize her.

That doesn’t surprise Sotomayor. For LasTesis, their occasional anonymity is not as much of a shock as their sudden fame. U.S. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez may quote them, but they aren’t celebrities. Cometa is a history professor. Valdés and Sotomayor teach theater. Cáceres works in fashion.

The four are more starving artists than influencers. Their office in Valparaíso, Chile—a port city known for its steep funiculars and colorful street art—is the result of a fundraising campaign. The building’s elevator attendant doesn’t even recognize LasTesis. To him they are simply *las niñas*, “the girls.”

Las niñas are late.

After much back-and-forth, the members of LasTesis agreed to an in-person interview with *Ms.* in advance of the spring launch of the English translation of their book, *Set Fear on Fire*. Sotomayor explained that the four are not an institution but an independent collective determined not to lose touch with their core identity as artists.

“We need to have freedom to just create whatever we want to do and not try to respond to any standards other people can apply to us,” Sotomayor says.

As she talks, Cometa cuts words from newspapers, pasting them in a collage. She is 34, like the others. Only three of them are present.

CLAUDIO REYES/GETTY IMAGES



From far left: Daffne Valdés, Sibila Sotomayor, Lea Cáceres and Paula Cometa of LasTesis; Sotomayor, Valdés and Cometa take part in a demonstration in Santiago, Chile.

make academic feminist theory “a bit easier to translate” by presenting it in a more accessible format than essays. They invited Cometa and Cáceres to help with the visuals and named themselves “The Theses” because they planned to regularly transform feminist tracts into performances.

Their first piece, “Patriarcado y Capital es Alianza Criminal” (“Patriarchy and Capital Are a Criminal Alliance”) was based on Silvia Federici’s 2004 book *Caliban and the Witch*, which looks at Marxism, capitalism and feminism. They wore red overalls at their local theater performance in 2018 to convey the industrial theme central to the book.

A pair of the overalls can be found in the office, as can a pink and purple Barbie boombox and a Crayon poster, all from earlier performances. The props contrast with the heavy nature of the texts on which the performances are built. These include Argentine anthropologist Rita Segato’s work on sexual violence and French author Virginie Despentes’ writing on the silence surrounding rape, both of which LasTesis incorporated into their second performance.

They were set to premiere that work in October 2019 when Chile erupted in protest. Massive demonstrations and riots over social inequality broke out around the country. As reports about the police’s sexual violence against female protesters spread, LasTesis shifted their focus from sexual violence to political and institutional violence. The resulting two-and-a-half-minute performance combined lyrics from the Chilean police anthem with squats representing

the body position police force women into for cavity searches. Recordings of the performance went viral.

The dance moves have since been executed on every continent except Antarctica. Women in New York took up the anthem outside the rape trial of disgraced Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein. The final lyrics, “The rapist is you,” have been translated from the original Spanish to languages ranging from English to Bangla.

“It is very beautiful, when you think about it, that something like a performance can kind of unite us,” Sotomayor says. “But it’s also very terrible. Because in the end, what unites us is violence.”

As Sotomayor points out, the fact that a local performance meant to disappear after it was performed could gain such traction speaks to the prevalence of the issue. “That’s why it resonated everywhere, because sexual violence is a problem everywhere,” she says.

Not all the attention has been positive. The Chilean police filed a lawsuit (since dropped) accusing LasTesis of hate speech. The women have received rape and death threats. Groups passed out flyers calling on the public to attack them. For more than a year a drone hovered over their neighborhood.

But they persevered.

Today they are planning a new, “more musical” piece. Their return to the U.S. comes after the right to abortion was overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court. The change has led Valdés to conclude that despite the serious problems of gender violence in Latin America, the feminist movement “is very strong and growing and there is a lot of work being done—possibly more than in other countries such as the United States.”

—KATYA CENDEL

Cáceres’ absence is not explained. In the sense of a feminist collective, their answers are considered to come from the group.

“We try to do everything in a feminist way,” Sotomayor explains. “We may be wrong, but we try.”

Cometa handles visuals—and humor. Valdés, her short hair in two mini ponytails, a rhinestone pasted on her forehead, serves tea. She works with words, translating their ideas poetically. Sotomayor, with her command of English (and political credentials as the daughter of a former political exile), takes the lead and makes the music.

“We say ‘kind of a song’ [when referring to their anthem] because we’re not singers or musicians,” she explains. “But, whatever, we believe a lot in the ‘do it yourself.’”

Sotomayor was 10 when her family returned to Chile, 18 when she met Valdés. They hatched their plan in 2018. The idea, Valdés explains, was to