

The Ballad of Chico Mendes

by Jon Lipsky

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and Boston's Museum of Science

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(The Ensemble is made up of two actors, a man and a woman, who play all the parts. When they are wearing a vest, which is inscribed with the markings of a rubber tree, they are speaking with the voice of Chico and/or the voice of the rainforest.)

Chico Man & Chico Woman

(Singing)

This is the story of Chico Mendes,
And the victorious movement he led,
Like the rubber tree standing tall,
He bled for us all.

Fires were burning the trees to the ground,
Chainsaws were cutting the canopy down,
Then they tried to take his land,
He took his stand.

Viva Amazonia! Viva Amazonia! Viva Amazonia!
Long life to life...long life to life in the Amazon.
Long life to life...long life to life in the Amazon.

Here comes the ballad of Chico Men des,
Battered with violence, riddled with lead,
If you choose to take his lead,
You, too, may bleed.

Yes, like the rubber tree,
Your heart, too, may bleed.

(Both actors clap their hands. They walk around each other like flamenco dancers.)

Chico Woman

Listen: Chico learns he is going to die.

Chico Man

Can you imagine what it's like to know you are going to die?

Chico Woman

You're not sick, you're not weak, and yet...

Chico Man

And yet... Someone comes up to you --

Chico Woman

A friend, perhaps...

Chico Man

-- and the friend was talking to another friend...

Chico Woman

-- who was talking to a stranger, and the stranger said:

Chico Man

Tell Chico Men des he is going to die.

(Pause)

Both

(overlapping)

They are going to kill me.

(They resume the flamenco walk)

Chico Woman

That's how it is in the Rainforest where I live.

Chico Man

They give you an anuncio, an announcement of your murder before they kill you.

Chico Woman

They scare you...

Chico Man

They torture you...

Chico Woman

To make you see death in every stranger's look...

Chico Man

-- grief in every friend's face.

Chico Woman

It's as if you are already dead.

Chico Man

A ghost. With no future.

Chico Woman

No hope.

Chico Man

So you live in the present.

Chico Woman

You hug the present.

Chico Man

Smother with affection each second of each day.

Both

What good is a corpse,
What good is a corpse,
I Chico Mendes, want to live!
I want to live!

(They clap hands)

Woman

His enemy proclaims his innocence.

(Man transforms into Darli)

Darli

I wouldn 't kill Chico. Why would I kill Chico? I'm a simple cattle farmer.

(Bowing)

Darli Alves da Silva at your service. All I want to do is make a profit.

(Pointing to Chico Woman , who makes sarcastic comments in Portuguese.)

But Chico provokes me. He says I pay off government officials. He says I run drugs. He says i have bodies hidden in my cow ponds. But I am innocent. My only fault is that I like women. And they like me. They ask me: How can you let that dirty little rubber tapper insult you like that? I say: God will punish him. Trust in God.

Woman

Listen: Here's what this is all about:

(To the audience)

Can you tell me what this is?

(Response from audience: a hamburger)

And what is it made of?

(Response: beef, cattle, meat, etc.)

Man

Right. Beef. Cattle. That's one side of this war. And who can tell me what this is?

(Response: a ball)

Good. A ball, and what's it made of?

(Response: rubber)

Woman

Rubber. That's the other side of this war.

Man

(Holding up a chainsaw)

Darli Alves da Silva is a cattle rancher.

Chico Woman

(Holding up Chico's vest)

Chico Mendes is a rubber tapper.

Man

For every head of cattle, Darli has to graze about five acres of rainforest. That means for every hamburger he has to clear cut -- permanently destroy -- an area of rainforest about the size of this stage. [Note: 6 sq. meters] Think of that.

Woman

To make this rubber ball, though, or rubber tires, or rubber mats, Chico doesn't have to cut or clear anything but a trail through the trees. Like tapping maple syrup from a maple tree, tapping rubber doesn't harm the rubber trees or the rainforest.

Man

Darli wants to clear the rainforest.

Woman

Chico wants to save it.

Man

So in the Amazon, the hamburger...

Woman

And the rubber ball...

Man

Are deadly enemies.

Both

(Singing)

Welcome to Cachoeira, (Pronounced Cash-ou-WARE-uh)

Welcome to Cachoeira,

Welcome to Cachoeira,

Cachoeira, where I'm at home!

(Actors clap their hands.)

Woman

Young Chico learns to tap.

Chico Man

This is where I grew up. On the estradas of Cachoeira, the rubber trails of Cachoeira estate, where it's always twilight under the canopy and hushed in the understory.

Chico Woman

My father was a seringueiro, a rubber tapper, and he taught me how to tap when I was eight. In the morning we would go down the trail and milk the rubber trees. In the afternoon we would collect the latex. This milk from the trees is latex. We had two trails with about 80 trees on each

trail. The trees were very far apart so we had to walk very fast, like this...

(Chico demonstrates the seringueiro walk)

Chico Man

This is the faca de seringa – the rubber tree knife. Each day, we would put two cuts in each tree like this, just enough to make the latex run, but not so deep as to hurt the tree. My father says that the tree can feel who's doing the cutting.

Chico Woman

So I would always greet my trees. I would shake their leaves to tell them...

(In Portuguese)

“Rubber tree, it is I, Chico Mendes, and I am going to cut you.”

Chico Man

(Simultaneously, in English)

“Rubber tree, it is I, Chico Mendes, and I am going to cut you.”

(Sound of leaves shaking)

Chico Woman

Listen! Father says the tree shakes its leaves to grant permission.

Chico Man

(To the audience)

Who would like to try the faca de seringa on this tree?

Chico Woman

(In Portuguese)

Who would like to try the faca de seringa on this tree?

Chico Man

Anyone want to try to be a seringueiro?

Chico Woman

(Same line in Portuguese)

Anyone want to try to be a seringueiro?

(Someone in the audience volunteers)

Chico Man

What's your name?

(After the volunteer gives his name, Chico Woman talks to the tree in Portuguese and Chico Man translates)

Chico Woman

(To the tree)

“Rubber tree – it is Jonny Lipsky, and he is going to cut you.”

(Sound of shaking leaves)

Chico Man

(To the volunteer)

Okay, go ahead.

(Volunteer cuts the tree, the actors invite him/her to take a bow, then return to the audience.)

Actors clap their hands)

Chico Man (Cont.)

Listen! One night, a stranger appears in Cachoeira.

(Woman transforms into Tavora wearing a beard)

Tavora

The stranger looks like a sorcerer with a thick, dark beard and a mane of

black hair. Most mysterious of all, he has in his pockets magic papers – news-papers! No one Chico knows can read newspapers, at least not without stuttering and stumbling. But when the stranger reads, he makes the intricate language sing. His hut is a mess, he can barely cook, he keeps to himself, but his voice is like thunder: “My name is Euclides Fernandes Tavora – let’s talk of the news of the day.”

(Man transforms into Young Chico)

Young Chico

Chico learns to read.

Tavora

(Pointing to papers)

What does this spell?

Young Chico

Dog.

Tavora

What does this spell?

Young Chico

Capitalist dog.

Tavora

And this?

Young Chico

Dog eat dog.

Tavora

And this?

Young Chico

Underdog.

Tavora

Good. Now you know everything.

Both

(Singing)

When I was young, there was passionfruit growing everywhere,
When I was young, there were parakeets flying in the air,
When I was young, I could hunt the tasty paca and sweet jacamim,
But now they burn, oh, no, never to return,
And I thought:
When will I wake up from this dream?

Chico Woman

(To the audience)

“The Burning Season” – that’s what they call it. (In Portuguese: “the burning season.”) The Burning Season: when cattlemen like Darli Alves da Silva set fire to the forest to make way for their pastureland. During the burning season, satellite pictures over the Amazon show nothing but a blanket of smoke by day and thousands of hellfires blazing by night. Day and night I suffer the sight of my homeland going up in flames.

(Man transforms into Darli)

Darli

(Holding a chain saw)

Well, don’t get so self-righteous about it. Why shouldn’t we burn? Why shouldn’t we cut down the rainforests to make a better life? Who are we saving it for? Rich tourists who want to photograph it? Smug professors who want to study it? Science Museums who want to exhibit it? We’re a poor country. We have to develop, progress, pull ourselves up by our bootstraps. Why, I consider myself a patriot.

Chico Woman

(Counting with a stop watch)

One, two, three, four... Friends, comrades, companheiros: every second a patch of rainforest the size of a football field is consumed by fire.

(Counting)

Twelve, thirteen, fourteen... Just now, as I speak, fourteen football fields of virgin forest have been set ablaze.

(Counting)

Nineteen, twenty... My friends: by the end of every burning season, they've destroyed an area of rainforest about half the size of California. Think of that!

Darli

California, huh? Well, no one in the United States seemed particularly concerned when they cut down the redwoods in California. I mean, the builders of the freeways in Los Angeles didn't get all weepy about saving the desert. I may not be an educated man, but I'm not stupid. Aren't we doing for Brazil exactly what the cowboys and pioneers did for North America a hundred years ago -- clearing the frontier? Who built the railroads -- ecologists? Who fought the Indian wars -- bleeding hearts? Who tamed the Wild West -- liberals? Don't be ridiculous. We just want the good life, like everybody else. It's our turn now. Viva Amazonia! My beloved Amazonia!

Chico Woman

Our beloved Amazonia.

(To the audience)

Listen! I have an idea.

(Actors clap their hands)

Man

Chico invents the Extractive Reserve...

(Woman transforms into Saleswoman, hawks her wares under the Man's dialogue.)

Saleswoman

Quinine! Quinine!

Man

-- like a national park, an area of land set aside to harvest the forest's natural products.

Saleswoman

Beat malaria! Getcha quinine!

Man

The Extractive Reserve would preserve the forest for the Amazon people...

Saleswoman

Jute fiber! Jute fiber!

Man

-- so they could sell the forest products.

Saleswoman

Wanna buy a sack?

Man

The government would like the idea because the extractive reserve could potentially make more money per acre than a cattle ranch.

Saleswoman

Heart of palm, black orchids, Brazil nuts!

Man

The rubber tappers like the idea because they could reclaim their power with workers' cooperatives.

Saleswoman

Hey, Ben and Jerry's Rainforest Crunch!

Man

Chico even made an alliance between the Indians and the Rubber Tappers, who used to be deadly enemies, so the reserve could benefit all the people.

Saleswoman

We got nuts, fruits, flowers and fibers. Saps, oils essences and medicines!

Man

There was only one trouble.

Saleswoman

(Interrupting her pitch)
Huh?

Man

No one outside the rainforest had ever heard of Chico or his brilliant idea.

Saleswoman

Oh.

(Actors clap their hands. Man transforms into Maria.)

Maria

A strange city woman flies in from the South. You can tell by her accent and her delicate hands she does not come from the jungle. She's an anthropologist with connections to a worldwide network of environmentalists. "My name is Maria Allegretti, and I carry a secret weapon.

(She holds up a flash camera)

This is my secret weapon.

(She flashes a picture of the Saleswoman)

Exposure!

(Maria takes pictures of the products as the Saleswoman holds them up.)

Both

Flash! Chico goes to Brasilia...

Saleswoman

To organize a national meeting of us rubber tappers.

Both

Flash! Chico goes to Washington...

Saleswoman

To show how U.S. foreign aid contributes to the destruction of our way of life.

Both

Flash! Chico warns the World Bank:

Saleswoman

“Your highway through the rainforest could be an ecological disaster.”

Both

Flash! Chico wins the United Nations prize...

Saleswoman

For outstanding service to the world environment.

Maria

Flash! He even captures the attention of Lucelia Santos, Brazil’s famous, glamorous, notorious, activist, television soap opera star! Let’s hear it for Lucelia!

(They both transform into Lucelia and put on a show)

Lucelia Santos

(Singing)

When you’re threatened from all sides,
And you have no place to hide,
Spread your net a little wider,
Find a powerful insider,
Gather allies, court new friends,
Who have influence and funds,
Go to London and New York,
Let the whole world hear you talk,
Book the Waldorf, or the Ritz,
And start a media blitz!
Flash!

Man

One person is not impressed. Chico’s wife, Ilzamar.

(He picks up guitar and begins a ballad under Ilzamar’s speech.
Woman transforms into Ilzamar, stirring a pot of soup.)

Ilzamar

There are two people called Chico Mendes. The famous Chico who has time for everybody in the world, and my Chico, who has no time for me. He named his two children after revolutionaries. He was married to a revolution, not to me.

Man

(Singing)
Ilzamar, Ilzamar...

Ilzamar

You may have heard about his famous pot belly. Well, he did not get that belly from my cooking. He got that pot from going door to door among the rubber tappers talking politics.

Man

(Singing)
Ilzamar, Ilzamar...

Ilzamar

Of course, they had to eat before they talked...

Man

(Singing)
I must love you from afar.

Ilzamar

He ate his way to power.

Man

(Singing)
Ilzamar, Ilzamar...

Ilzamar

And now I eat alone.

Man

(Singing)

I am trapped inside this war.

Ilzamar

I have lost my appetite. I only hope his unexpected fame will protect him from that murderer Darli Alves da Silva.

(Man transforms into Darli)

Darli

Enough! Enough! I'm sick of this whiny, whimpering Chico Mendes! Chico's like one of those insects that burrows into you to feed on your brain. Where I come from, if a man insults you, you must face him down or die of shame. I will not be shamed!

Chico Woman

Listen! Darli Alves da Silva has sold most of his cattle and bought the land around Seringal Cachoeira, our home. He's going to try to move us off the land and then he'll level it to the ground. We must stick together or we will lose everything.

Darli

But I'm a reasonable man. I'll move you to another part of the rainforest, or you can work on my ranch if you can stand the sunshine. I'll even build you a chapel to show my good will.

Chico Woman

Listen! We hold a meeting. We call for an empate, a blockade of the forest. The empate has been our greatest weapon against the ranchers. Rubber tappers from all over converge on Seringal Cachoeira to form a human barricade to stop the chainsaws of Darli Alves da Silva.

Darli

(To Chico)

Hey! Chico! I've got a government order. I've got the military police on my side, and if worse comes to worse, it won't cost much to defend my honor. You can get a union leader murdered around here for as little as five hundred bucks.

Chico Woman

(To the audience)

No! We cannot use violence against their violence. Political support for our movement will dry up like a scorched forest if we act like just another bunch of thugs. We'll reason with the cutting crews – they're workers like us – and we'll shame the police with our nonviolent defiance.

Darli

I warned you! God will punish you. Start the chainsaws!

(Sound of chainsaws.

Chico woman brings out a “fence” decorated with portraits of women and children from the rain forest: protesters acting as human shields.)

Chico Woman

Okay, picture this: at dawn we gather at the entrance to Seringal Cachoeira.

Chico Man

At first light, we see the chainsaws and automatic weapons of Darli's workers and hired guns.

Chico Woman

But we stand blocking the entrance to Seringal Cachoeira with the women and children in front so they do not dare open fire on us.

Chico Man

I mean, even they won't shoot at kids. So here come the chainsaws, and the only way to stop them is for everybody to shout: Viva Amazonia!

(Sound of chainsaws)

Chico Woman

Everybody shout it with us: Viva Amazonia!

(Sound of chainsaws gets louder)

Chico Man

C'mon, we can't hear you!
(leads the audience)
Viva Amazonia! Louder! Again!

(Actors and audience chant together.)

Viva Amazonia! Viva Amazonia! Viva Amazonia!!!

(Chainsaws stop. Pause. Then celebratory music.)

Chico Woman

Listen! We did it! We did it! Let's drink cachaca!

Chico Man

Let's dance the forro! (pronounced fo-haw)

Chico Woman

Let's party all night long!

Chico Man

Darli has backed down!

Chico Woman

He's thrown in the towel!

Chico Man

He's sold his land to the government.

Chico Woman

And the government has given it back to us.

Chico Man

Seringal Cachoeira has been declared the first extractive reserve in Amazonia.

Chico Woman

We've preserved our land...

Chico Man

Our way of life...

Chico Woman

And take back our power.

Both

(Singing)

Long life to life, long life to life in the Amazon.
Long life to life, long life to life in the Amazon,
Long life to life, long life to life in the Amazon...

(A gunshot. The actors freeze in contorted positions)

Chico Man

Darli's men kill two teenage boys as they are sleeping at a protest meeting. But the police do nothing.

(Gunshot)

Chico Woman

We dig up evidence of two other murders Darli has committed in another state. But the police do nothing.

(Gunshot)

Chico Man

Darli's men kill yet another union organizer. Still the police do nothing.

(Gunshot)

Chico Woman

I receive an anonymous phone call, an anuncio, the announcement of my death.

(Pause)

Chico Man

I write letters to everyone telling them I am a dead man.

(Pause)

Chico Woman

I beg the government for protection. I say:

Both

What good is a corpse?

What good is a corpse?

What good is a corpse?

(Several gunshots ring out. Actors contort their bodies.

Pause.

Music.)

Both

When my body's laid to rest
Don't waste sad words on me
Don't lay dead flowers on my grave
Leave them on the tree
The tree must fruit
The seed must sprout
Or else the forest dies
If you want to honor me
Organize Organize

End of Play

(Lights go down on stage. The actors take their bows.
House lights come up. The actors speak to the audience.)

Epilogue

Woman

This isn't really the end of the ballad of Chico Mendes, only the beginning. Chico's murder in 1988 galvanized world attention to the plight of the rainforests and the people who live in them.

Man

Darli Alves da Silva and his son were brought to trial and convicted for his murder.

Woman

But just this week, an American nun, 73 year old, Dorothy Stang, who had worked for 20 years to save the rain forest, was ambushed by hit men, just like Chico.

Man

And just this week a camphaneiro and a former union president were found shot to death in the same rural area where Dorothy Stang lived and died.

Woman

Two thousand federal soldiers have been sent to the region to restore order as thousands of mourners and protesters have converged for the funeral of Dorothy Stang.

Man

What can we do?

Woman

There's got to be something we can do.

Man

If you want to stay after we can talk about what people like you and me can do for the rainforest and the people of Amazonia.

Woman

And if you have to leave, keep the memory of Chico Mendes and Dorothy Stang alive by telling other people about their stories.

(The actors lead a discussion about what is happening in the rainforest at the present, how things have changed and not changed since the murder of Chico Mendes, and what

actions people can take to effect what is happening in the Amazon.)

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