

## Elsa Kvamme

# Touching the Telephone Pole

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Looking at myself as the main character in the drama of my life is as thrilling and impossible as hearing the sound of one's own voice. I remember my four-year-old self walking down an enormous hill talking to my elder sister, and suddenly experiencing my voice as extremely dark. I sounded like a boy! Soon after, an uncle made a recording of me and my other cousins, and when he played the tape for us I could not believe that such piping girlish sounds had emerged from my mouth. At that time we lived in a working class area where the church rewarded faithful Sunday school children with a silver spoon every month, so my mother sent us to the Sunday school to make the family prosper. Possibly as an extra bonus, I was asked to read a poem in the church. They gave me a big light blue book covered with golden letters. I was by no means able to read, so how I don't know, but I still remember standing there alone in front of the church audience speaking the text out loudly, clinging to the light blue book in front of me. Afterwards, a neighbour told me it was so beautiful, she had cried. From that moment I stopped worrying about the sound of my voice, accepting that what I hear and what other people receive from it belong to two, possibly three, different worlds. So maybe that was my first milestone, if a milestone can be defined as the moment of experiencing a sudden insight of somewhat liberating character.

The first antagonist in the drama of my life was my sister Brita, five years older than me. She was also my hero, which made it even more complicated. In the afternoons our family often had picnics in the forests surrounding Oslo. At one of these picnics, my sister told me that if I touched one of the dark brown telephone poles standing regularly at both sides of the road, I would die. I was shocked. How could we be surrounded by such dangerous items? But Brita described so vividly how the electricity from the telephone poles might turn me into a piece of roast meat, that I tried to walk as far out of their reach as possible. On that same picnic Brita refused to drink up her milk and we ended up

driving away from her, my sister still standing in the forest with her glass of milk. I cried desperately, believing she might be left in the forest forever. The car stopped after some hundred metres, and I was sent back to get her, "if she has drunk her glass of milk!" Brita poured the milk on some unfortunate ants and came along. And then, on the way back to the car, I did it. I walked right over and touched the telephone pole! Many things have been wiped from my memory, but the sudden decision of that moment stands out as clearly as if it were yesterday. Was it to discover what was true myself, no matter the high risk? Or was it because I found myself trapped as a go-between in a family drama only I took seriously? I touched the telephone pole, and to my surprise nothing happened. I confronted my sister with my discovery, but she just sobbed, saying: "Of course not, you have to climb higher up! "

While I write this article, I am touring high-school-classes to talk about the process of making my feature film *Fia*. I am in a hotel room by the Norwegian coast, in a place called Rørvik (literally the bay of turbulence). At 8,30 p.m. the small village suddenly becomes alive: it is the hour when the ferry called Hurtigruta going from Finnmark in the North to Bergen in the South crosses the ferry going in the opposite direction. The arrival of the ferries is announced by a deep blow of their horns, like two whales searching for mates. In every hotel room, every bar and every office there are pictures of the two ferries on the walls. I guess the temptation of taking one of them has been the daily dilemma for everyone living here. What makes the sudden decision of leaving, changing your life, or just staying where you are?

I grew up in a family of pessimists. That is also partly a national characteristic. When the Norwegians say that Norway did

not suffer that badly during World War II, it is as if we were cowards who did not do our duty. When the Danes say the same, they add: "My God, we were lucky!" I remember begging my beloved grandmother to buy a number in the "quick lottery", but every time she put her hand in the bucket to draw a lot, she said: "We never win. We are not the winning kind." Of course she never won, and I intuitively felt there was some connection between her prophecy and its fulfilment. But she had her reasons for considering herself not of the winning kind. She was a beautiful town girl and she married, in her early twenties, a local doctor in one of the poorest, biggest and most remote districts of western Norway who was twenty years older than her. During the war my father - her only son - was arrested as a young medical student and sent to the concentration camp in Buchenwald, a stay he barely survived. Shortly after his return my grandmother went to a party, and when she came back she found her husband dead in his bed. The next forty years she lived the lonely life of a widow in the little town of Moss. For her six grandchildren however, she transformed Moss into the promised town, with the best of breads, the best meat and the best toy shops, where there were no limits to the amount of time, love and true stories she would share with her grandchildren. Even my father's experiences in Buchenwald became thrilling dramas where the students saved themselves from a bombarded station by trading a locomotive for a packet of cigarettes.

Sitting at Rørvik I remember my father's trip on one of these Northern ferries fifty years later. He had a reserved table for the week-long trip, and at his first meal he discovered that he was going to share it with ex-officers of Hitler's Wehrmacht, coming to revisit the Finnmark they had burned down fifty years earlier. Their first question was of

course where he had learned to speak German so fluently, a question he avoided answering truthfully. Why did he not tell them right away how he learned German in Buchenwald? My father's answer was quite simple: because that would have blocked any further communication and he would have learned nothing about their version of the war. As a researcher of neurochemistry he wanted to stay neutral, in order to extract as much as possible of the remaining essence of one of the biological courses in his own life's drama, which has partly been the drama of his children as well. We owe our existence to the Swedish Red Cross, who organised the liberation of the arrested students before the final breakdown of Nazi Germany. As an eternal reminder, my birthday was on the 13<sup>th</sup> of January, exactly the same date my father had arrived in Buchenwald ten years earlier. I guess my father's stories have been the backbone of my wanting to do theatre and film. Some of these stories have been told, most of them remain untold, creating an ever-present question in me: how could people become so cruel?

One of my most important "milestones" was called Åsmund. Åsmund was older than me, but short, red-haired and with anti-Vietnam war badges wherever there was a free spot. His weapons were a guitar and a beautiful voice, singing the most unpleasant songs in a poetic way. In a few summer days he changed my whole view of the world. Separated by one hundred kilometres, we wrote letters, and still my heart jumps at the memory of seeing the thick white envelope in the mail box, filled with poems, political polemics and romantic fantasies. He got letters back written on the same wave-length. While longing for the next visit I learned how to play the guitar and sing the same songs, I read the recommended political books, the most important of which was *Summerhill* by

A.S. Neill.

Neill had founded a "free school", from the profound belief that human beings are not born evil, but that they may become so, if they are not allowed to grow and develop following their own will and needs. If their sane instincts are not hurt, their curiosity and thirst for knowledge will make them learn what they need, contrary to Lutheran teachings like, "If you love your child, you punish him".

In my high-school English lesson, we had to give a lecture on a book we liked. I talked about *Summerhill* for one hour, in English, without a manuscript. Today I smile at and envy that fifteen-year-old, so filled with a complete vision that for some moments she could walk on water. It took years before I experienced that same inner certainty again.

The memory of old teachers is my favourite archive of characters, as these were people I had the opportunity of studying for hours and hours. The good ones are still my protagonists and heroes. Like Torp, our German teacher, who started his lesson the moment he opened the door, and who made the whole class recite Goethe's *Erlkönig* as if it were the last Rock hit. He gave me an everlasting love for foreign languages, and the courage to fight to penetrate their secret codes in order to reach a wider understanding.

Similarly inspiring was a beautiful young guide at the Henie-Onstad Museum of Modern Art. Her introduction to modern paintings opened our teenage eyes to the beauty of imagining and discovering rather than just recognising, criticising and classifying like collectors of dead butterflies. After closing time, she invited us down to listen to the latest recordings of Arne Nordheim, our biggest contemporary electronic composer, but at that time ridiculed as the producer of



Saltkompagniet. Photo: Agnethe Weisser

"cat music". I had never heard such strange and thrilling music.

I will never forget the boyfriend who, after the visit to the museum, bought that record and invited me to listen to it. He was the first to give me an orgasm, which was the biggest surprise I ever had. Nobody had told me about the existence of such a phenomenon, and it led me into a deep exis-

tential crisis: if the knowledge of such an indescribable pleasure had been hidden from me, what other things were there to find out?

One of our teachers at that time was a Christian woman from a very puritan part of Norway. She was new to the class and her strict attitude made her immediately unpopular. As a radical Christian initiative,

she put an "honesty box" in the class room and told us it was "the box of truth", where we might write anonymously whatever existential or personal questions we had.

My boyfriend sitting a few desks behind me was an easy target for the exchange of love notes. One day I wrote a note with a question of existential importance for me at that time: "If God exists, why don't women get orgasms as easily and organically as men?" I showed the note to my boyfriend, but wisely decided not to put it into the honesty box. One day however the note had disappeared from my pen box. When the teacher arrived, she was all red in the face, screaming that somebody had misused the honesty box. I blushed. I had not signed the note, nor put it into the honesty box, but I knew immediately that somebody had betrayed me.

Once more I had touched the telephone pole, but this time it really started a burning hell. Afterwards she gave me bad marks whatever I wrote. My salvation was the official exam, but my biggest victory was her obvious feeling of injustice, as if God himself had spat on her by giving me good marks: maybe there was a God after all - one who thought my question quite relevant.

Most of my milestones have been reached by the help of go-betweens and helpers. To name all of them would make a book. But Agnethe was one. One summer holiday, I attended the folk singers' festival in Haugesund. When it was over, I did not feel like leaving, and met another girl, some years older than me, feeling the same way. "Why don't we go hitch-hiking?" she said. My eyes spun around twice. Was it possible for two girls to go hitch-hiking? "Oh yeah," Agnethe said, she had even done it alone. The trick was to look the driver right in the eyes and ask: "Where are you going?" If he answered: "Wherever you like", or hesitated in other

ways, the only answer was slamming the door. In her experience, most people driving a car knew exactly where they were going.

Agnethe introduced me to the art of hitch-hiking, which I practised for many years, and which taught me more about human beings than I could have learned at any university. Especially in Germany, where I met people who told me their versions of World War II and their own perspective on it, in a way that made me understand some of the beliefs and longings that had attracted Hitler's faithful supporters. Many of these post-war men were drinking heavily all through the ride, and would tell the strangest stories, having nothing to lose by being honest to a hitchhiker. Many also revealed a hidden kindness, driving me hundreds of kilometres further than they were supposed to go, finding me a good hitch-hiking spot, with the same pride as fishermen knowing a river.

I have continued being a hitchhiker in my professional life, but for many years I felt this was a handicap rather than a talent; not succeeding in building big families of group theatre or film communities.

Seeing some extracts from the work of Swedish director Suzanne Osten's Friteatern on television, I decided my choice of career: I wanted to work in an independent theatre group. It struck me like lightning, and as the solution to my urge to create drama combined with my urge to move and create with other people, in a contemporary medium. Totto, who was my friend from college, shared the same dream. But Totto refused whatever I proposed as another traditional cliché, referring instead to Grotowski. I asked him to show me this Grotowski, which led us to Odin Teatret in Denmark. It was not exactly love at first sight. We left our names and addresses, as they were auditioning for new actors in

February. At that time I had nothing better to do, so I took the ferry to Denmark once again, with the intention of getting a free workshop in physical theatre.

Totto left Odin Teatret after a few days to become a fisherman while, one month later, I was accepted as one of the four lucky acting students. I stayed at Odin Teatret for two and a half years. Why did I stay? And why did I leave? I guess the reason was the same for both of the moves, but with opposite connotations.

The task for one of my first improvisations was to be "the queen of the sea", having to dive into the deep sea in order to save my beloved. I remember my surprise at being able to change the colours of the room only with my imagination; the pain of seeing my blood float away without being able to bring my beloved back to life; and the comfort of having the director of Odin Teatret, Eugenio Barba, there soberly watching, commenting, but never in a private way, wanting to distill something from these improvisations as part of a bigger pattern only he could see.

One day Iben Nagel Rasmussen and Jens Christensen, two "old" Odin actors who had been touring the Dostoyevsky performance *Min Fars Hus*, arrived in the white room. They were wearing acrobatic "balloon" trousers that Iben had designed herself. I thought they were the most beautiful human beings I had ever seen. They taught us that the true meaning of acrobatics was to play with the air. Iben advised us to make our own trousers and the moment the black tricots were changed for a pair of yellow trousers they seemed to lift me through the air by their own force.

My first appearance in public was on an open field in Southern Italy, in the first version of *The Book of Dances*. Being inspired by Native American Indians, I had put a black ribbon around my head. Barba

replaced it with a golden ribbon from a catholic religious shop. I can't explain why the change of ribbon had such an effect on the development of my character, but it did. There is no stronger transformational force than a loving regard, especially when it comes from a director believing in a *via negativa*.

One year later however, returning to Southern Italy, I made the decision to leave the theatre. Odin Teatret was about to conquer the world and I did not feel ready for that: I wanted to find my own way. It was a terrible decision, because it meant leaving an intensely interwoven community, a daily training and a way of life which I, from that moment, would have to reconstruct for myself. Once again I touched the telephone pole and once again I remained surprised for quite a while that I had actually survived.

My artistic destiny has been to learn by doing, and I still thank my Gods there were no critics present when my theatre group, Saltkompagniet, showed their first performance in the main square of Arendal. The performance was based on Henry Miller's short story *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder*, and luckily we had another week before the next performance. During that week we reshaped and cut down the performance radically, and it started working and vibrating with the audience more or less as intended.

The daily work of Saltkompagniet, combined with our instant need to earn money, developed my "method". Inspired by the characters the actors presented, often derived from novels, I developed dramatic scenarios, sometimes copying the structures of other myths or plays, put together with the actors' improvisations and material. I was the only one who suffered from this "method", since I often gave myself the part of the antagonist. I could still not imagine -



Elsa Kvamme in *The Man Who Gave Birth to a Woman*. Photo: Agnethe Weisser

as many advised - stepping completely outside the body of the performance. But I was hurt by the murmuring of my colleagues and friends: "You are such a good director, why do you want to act?" That kind of murmuring followed me through the years, but step by step each change of lyric hid a personal victory: "You are such a good actress, why do you want to write?" "You make theatre, why do you want to do cinema?" If the cobbler never goes beyond his last, how can new shoes be invented?

After six years with the company I was completely worn out, and the decision to quit was like taking off a heavy backpack, although the company had gained an international reputation. I had seen César Brie's solo performance *Running Towards the Sun*, which changed my opinion that solo performances were not "real" theatre. An invitation to make workshops combined with a work demonstration for Italian women inspired a piece called *The Right to be Ugly*, and this resulted in the solo performance *The Man Who Gave Birth to a Woman*, which was played in all kinds of secret places, until a very good review from the most important Norwegian critic at that time completely changed my relationship with the audience.

A year later I received a guaranteed minimum salary for life as an artist from the Norwegian state. That day my head nearly crashed into the ceiling. I sent flowers to my parents, colleagues and former companions, to every one who had had to deal with my impatience and workaholic attitudes. I was thirty years old and still had, hopefully, a long life ahead of me. I just had to roll up my sleeves and touch all the telephone poles I could find. I had got what I had never dreamt was possible: an artistic *carte blanche*. Now it was up to me to define where to concentrate my energy.

The minimum salary turned out to be

enough to guarantee my survival, but to create something within theatre I still depended on the taste and sympathy of committees filled with colleagues, competitors or other people deciding who was on the list to receive the necessary grants to make new theatre projects.

I initiated and directed a big project called *The Girl with the Blue Eye*, an almost non-verbal performance based on true stories about incest seen from two young girls' point of view. Although that play was very successful, my next projects got no support, one of the reasons being: "Now it is somebody else's turn!" In the small, but rich country of Norway it turned out to be very difficult to stay in a creative stream other than as a solo artist. And for female artists touring alone, it is especially lonely.

I remember, after a performance in Trondheim, sitting alone with my beef and a glass of red wine, being envious of the laughter and talk of a group of women at another table. When they were finished they came over to my table and thanked me for the performance; it had been great fun and that was what they had been laughing at. So why didn't they invite me over to their table?

I discovered a new and impossible love when I started writing and performing songs. It started by sharing my secret hobby of translating Jacques Brel songs into Norwegian. It was a large step, however, from translating songs into daring to make my own, and putting my own melodies and rhythm to them. I had never thought of myself as either writer or musician, it just grew out of necessity. A good song was like an "instant Stanislavky" bringing me right into the atmosphere and feeling of a miniature drama. Making my first cabarets brought me closer both to my own emotional memories and to the art of condensed storytelling. It





Elsa Kvamme. Photo: Jon Petter Evensen

surprised my former colleagues and audiences of experimental theatre, and attracted a different and larger audience. Songs could be played wherever there was a piano, but as Norwegian is such a small language for a song writer, I woke up one day and thought: why do I keep them so small, why don't I take the step of trying to project them on the big canvas where I see them in my head?

From the moment I saw Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* I had been fascinated by the comforting darkness of the cinema. Seeing Buster Keaton being chased by stones falling down a hill, I knew there were things which only could be done in movies. Earning fast money from a very commercial job, I could suddenly afford to go for two semesters to the Tisch School of Arts in New York, to learn the basics of making and editing 16 mm. films. Entering the film school, I felt as if I had finally reached the aquarium where I belonged. Being and working in New York revitalised both my creative energy and my working spirits, breathing the air of the community of

unrealistic dreams like the many "hitch-hiking" waiters and waitresses waiting for their day of opportunity. It allowed me to escape the suffocating atmosphere of the Norwegian small town environment, where knowing the right people or coming from the right family is often more important than the artistic potential of your project.

When I finished the first film school semester, my teacher said: "Maybe, three years from now, we'll see a feature film from Norway made by Elsa." It took twelve years. But doing it was like imagining, building and finally climbing up a magic mountain where every second of former lived experience was crucial to get the crew up to the top and down again. Without the secret urge to touch the telephone pole, I probably would not have known that such mountains exist.

ELSA KVAMME (Norway) works as a director, writer and cabaret singer. In 1977 she founded her own independent group Saltkompagniet. Since 1983 she has made solo performances, cabarets, theatre projects, CDs and the songbook *Things that small girls like*. After studying cinema in New York, she made several war documentaries and in 2003 her first feature film, *Fia*. In 2004 she wrote the book *Kjære Jens, kjære Eugenio. Om Jens Bjørneboe, Eugenio Barba og opprørernes teater* which is based on the correspondence between Eugenio Barba and the Norwegian writer and playwright Jens Bjørneboe in the early 1960s.