

Roberta Secchi - Viviana Fortunato

Speaking Stones

Sometimes I avoided the stone on which I was meant to stumble, but then it has reappeared hidden in somebody's hand. Feigning indifference that person approaches to ask an embarrassing question, insinuate a doubt, or simply to make a very pleasant or very ugly comment. Hearing those words something in me falls, drops, is lost or displaced. The surrounding landscape changes, I am somewhere else.

Milestones were originally placed, I suppose, along master-roads connecting major cities. They were a unity of measure of both space and time. They became regular and expected appointments for travellers on their journey.

Today, when we are travelling on highways, plenty of signs tell us where we are, in relation to the topography of urbanisation. But if I think of milestones in relation to theatre work, I think of real stones, fragments of rock, portions of the hidden landscape one cannot see when travelling on highways as fast as possible from one city to another; perhaps even more so because I live in a big city, encircled by a web of highways. Everything is urbanised around me and I have to accept and escape at the same time. I attempt the impossible task of creating a landscape around me where I can move and travel. What are the signs I meet then, what are my appointments like?

Walking in the field of theatre outside academic and official circuits, in an autonomous group, one feels far away from main roads. Do we believe that along this way there is a better chance of *approaching* main roads? Even if we have precise landmarks to which we can refer, all the time we are searching with our feet for an invisible path, hidden in the surrounding vegetation. The ground is scattered with anonymous stones, and the ones we stumble into become our milestones: they make us fall down. When we get up something has changed around us and from our perspective too. We look at the stone responsible, but it is mute. As it does not speak, I ask myself some questions.

I am thirty-four, and I started my apprenticeship in theatre ten years ago. Before that, when I was an art student, I often went to see theatre - I had already moved to Milan, where it is easy to see all kinds of performance on stage. Theatre was among the subjects I had studied (badly) at the Academy of Fine Arts. That world had never attracted me. I entered it, so to say, by the window, because of encounters: people, their words and acts, references to names and written pages, readings, coincidences.

From one day to the next, all my habits started to change: there is a "before" and an "afterwards". I believe these two are actually linked by a gradual change, but for our memory's convenience we place an event, a day, a sentence - a stone - to mark being changed by a new awareness.

A large stone made me stumble into the first workshop on the art of the actor, which was organised by our future director, a musician from Argentina. Some years before I had been introduced to him by a mutual friend, and I had seen some rehearsals of the performances he directed with students in the high school where he was teaching at that time. Now he wanted to set up a theatre research group that would meet and work every day. I had just come back from a very long journey, and nothing was of interest to me in my life. I spent all the money I had left to take part in the workshop. My decision was neither premeditated nor thought out. It went against any confused project I was nourishing in my head.

Now I understand that the encounter with the *exceptions* of theatre has been crucial for me. Exceptions: the experiences of people who plunge into reality without becoming mundane. They keep a light alive to illuminate their way, and in so doing, they may also give light to others. I was not attracted by the magic of the stage or of a particular performance. I was moved by the possibility of an unknown kind of relationship with other people and with my life.

At the end of the first year of work, the director told us we had to present a work demonstration of what we had been practising during that year. Two of us voted *no* but reluctantly accepted this imposition: a

Roberta Secchi in *Che furor illustri la mirabil*.
Photo: Monica Zipparrì



JAIL

2004: the first time our group performs in a jail. We have to set up the stage at the end of a long corridor lined with cells on both sides. We are in the wing for prisoners who have to be isolated from the others: *pentiti*, informers, rapists, paedophiles and transsexuals. The walls and the iron bars of the cell-doors are of a very pale blue, like that used for the clothes and linen of newborn male babies. While we prepare the stage, prisoners call out to us from behind the bars, they tease us, talk to us and question us. From one of the cells they offer us hot coffee. The relaxed and lively relationship between warders and most prisoners bewilders me. One by one the cells are opened, and prisoners sit on the chairs in front of us. Warders stand at the back and the sides. We start. Their concentration is intense and focussed, even when they laugh loudly. They grasp what we are doing; they study it and do not let it fall. I feel, as never before in front of an audience, that the performance becomes their property. I am moved by the quality of their attention. What takes place during the performance is the sharing of an act - and we are marked both by the act we perform and by the act we witness.

PRESENCES

One day I am alone in the workroom and yet I realise I am not alone. Who came in with you today? Who brought you in? These presences slip into your actions. The next person coming into the room after you is not alone either. Each of us brings along a crowd. How could you fail to notice that before? The workroom becomes the privileged place where you can let these presences exist, listen to them and face them.

PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITAL

1997: the first time we perform in front of an

audience of psychiatric patients. Almost all of them are old people who have spent the last twenty, thirty or forty years of their lives in hospital. Nine out of ten are women, who came from the countryside: when they were young any girl who behaved unusually was very likely to be taken straight to the madhouse.

They are around us while we prepare our props: they talk, scream, complain, laugh and cry. Some of them clearly don't want to be there. Their eyes, dull and shining profoundly at the same time, meet ours without fear. They don't show any conventional signs of social behaviour to which we could respond mechanically. I see awe and tension on some of my colleagues' faces. We try to make ourselves feel more comfortable; we are kinder to each other than usual. When the performance starts, our acting is laid frighteningly bare in front of us.

COSTUME

The first search for a true costume: not a dress, but a layer that may become the right body for the character. I have to mobilise myself in that body in order to animate it.

LOOK

1994: at the first workshop I attended on the art of the actor there were about twenty of us, both students and teachers. Few of the students had any theatre experience or only a little, as amateurs. We worked in a big old house on a hill, in the countryside. On the very first evening I was washing the dishes in a dark corner of the kitchen on the ground floor, when the back door next to me suddenly opened. A man, aged around thirty-five, came in carrying a bag on his shoulder: he was an actor who was going to teach at the workshop, but I didn't know that. I met his eyes and something in me was shaken and became frightened. Those eyes



were jumping ahead; they were hungry and full of space. They betrayed a life I had never thought could be found there, in the middle of a face! It was the first thrill of theatre.

INCOGNITO

Many inner and outer concerns dispute and manage my actions, often co-existing *incognito* from each other inside me. As I sit down to write this article, I need to make these concerns meet and acknowledge each other, so that a forum is opened inside me with the faces and voices that populate my solitude. How can I extract a clear point of view from this crowd? I try to play fair with words so as to allow them to provide good sap for today's thirst.

IN LOVE

Theatre is a good vehicle for love, and love is a good vehicle for theatre. Maybe we need to fall in love with somebody in order to fall in love with our work: that person has a key we need to use in order to go forward. But once the door is open, the rooms will communicate for good or evil. What was confusedly nurturing your work may start to destroy it. Then you would like to shut the door and throw the baby away with the dirty bath-water.

If I don't take my most intimate joy and pain into theatre, what else can I take there? A paradoxical discovery: only the most personal experience can introduce you to what is utterly impersonal, to what exists beyond and in spite of you.

FUTURE TENSE

Younger members joining the group may turn the past-to-present tense into the

present-to-future tense. Last year two apprentices joined our group from Venezuela: a director and an actress. They have definitely contributed to strengthening the Latin American presence in Teatro La Madrugada. At twenty, Viviana Fortunato, the actress, is now the youngest person in the group. About milestones she writes:

Milestones mark the covered miles along the edge of the track, a fact of great importance. My milestones are those that helped me to make theatre, without waiting for anything, believing, giving me an impulse to do what I need; the place where every day I do what I want to do. They are not footmarks I left on other people; they are footmarks that other people have left on me; people or situations that helped me to understand which path I have to follow. They remain behind like small stones to mark the way and remind me that without them I would have been lost. They help me and give me strength to build my path, with the expectation that I will meet myself at each step. With my stones I made a long journey, I crossed a vast sea without forgetting to notice what I was leaving behind; being afraid because I didn't know what would come. I left what was most important in order to be consistent with my truth. I had to decide whether to leave my roots in the ground or to use my wings, and I did not want to choose.

The first theatre performance I saw was Snow White. I already knew the story and when I saw that she was about to eat the apple I screamed: "Snow White, don't eat that apple!" Then I discovered that what happens on the stage is both fiction and reality.

I remember the sketches for the costumes of Romeo and Juliet drawn by my mother, that surprised me so much; the pictures of performances taken by my father; my first improvisation where, with a stick I had made, I tried to walk like Charlie Chaplin; the dress for the wedding I didn't go to, which I then used for

Viviana Fortunato and Roberta Secchi in *Che furor illustri la mirabil*.

Photo: Monica Zipparrì

my first scene; Aquiles Nazoa's belief that made me know death wrapped in silk, the father of colours and forms, the son of violets and rats who made me believe in art; my first performance, where Simon Bolivar ran into a cardboard window and made it tumble down on himself; my first professor; my first director; my first master; the requests to my father to allow me to do theatre; my mother's unconditional support; my elf, my green toad who is always with me and does everything necessary to help me; Guanaré, where I met an actress and her theatre group that became my landmark; my director, my master and Teatro La Madrugada; the first text I learned by heart and still remember; my first theatre books with very abstract and very concrete words: rhythm, emotional memory, physical actions, realistic theatre, theatre of cruelty - words that seem to contradict each other; my first sequence of physical actions; my first fixed improvisation; a performance that taught me how to believe unconditionally in what I do; the new performances, the new difficulties; people who helped me and help me every day to build my way; people and places I leave and I meet; and also the people who did not want me to settle my stones, people who by their opposition make my convictions stronger each day.

All that we can build is made out of our stones. An oven, a road, a wall, a tower, a house... they will be speaking forms, because each stone hides the story of a crossed distance, a farewell, an encounter, a transformation. But building on the quicksands of theatre requires tremendous strength, an inhuman effort is necessary not to let things fall and end.

Our stones may be left to lie on the ground and remain untouched. Their voices will heap up in times of silence. Afterwards, can they still be heard in the distance? Can we let them speak?

I wish that our milestones will be rubbed hard so that they give out sparks when it is cold and dark.

ROBERTA SECCHI (Italy) was born in 1970. In 1994, she co-founded the theatre group I Servi di Scena - Teatro La Madrugada, under the direction of Raúl Iáza. Roberta has taken part in all the group performances as an actress. In 2002, she created a solo performance, inspired by the character of the Japanese writer Murasaki Shikibu. Since 1999 she has been leading theatre workshops for children and adults.

VIVIANA FORTUNATO (Venezuela/ Italy) was born in 1983. In 1996 she started her theatre studies in Caracas, taking part in Anna Julia Rojas' theatre workshop and attending the School of Scenic Arts Juana Sujo. In 2003 she joined Teatro La Madrugada in Milan, Italy.