

Cristina Castrillo

The Sea Is Not Always Transparent

I am aware that it would be clearer to consider the steps and conflicts I have to confront in the creative process by taking examples from only one of our productions, even if schematically. Nevertheless, I would like to draw attention to some elements that seem to be constant, despite the differences of each production, and to focus on the existence, or not, of a theme as a point of departure and on the value of preliminary research.

Mostly, the initial idea is only a clue that helps give the first direction for our work, and it can come from a need to deepen a particular theatrical approach that has emerged from our everyday activity. In some cases the process is planned only as simple research, without the intention of ever making a performance.

In our creative process, the first clues are always connected to sensations rather than reasoning and - perhaps in an intuitive way - to the wish to enrich particular aspects of our theatrical language. What I call "research" is literally the discovery of the performance to be made; a performance we probably have been gestating unwittingly within ourselves for a long time.

The extensive preliminary period is decisive for every production, not only because potential themes begin to emerge then, but also because it is when the mutual appropriation of the eventual theme is resolved. This means that we build a work strategy that helps the actors - and me - look for a personal reason to be there, rather than for a way of interpreting a given role or a fixed character. It is a strategy that allows the actors themselves to develop creatively the material that will become a fundamental part of the future performance.

This almost magical dialectic between the work of the actor and my personal vision slowly becomes the pivot of a new creation, not as a text to be staged or a character to be interpreted, but as an intense personal and human meeting that, through a particular creative technique, brings out aspects of the self allowing us to discover the content

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that the work should have.

The steps that accompany our creative processes are therefore, in general terms, always the same: an initial point of departure that doesn't define the theme of the performance directly; and a long period of research that results in the personal elaboration of actors' material to be used and in the actual discovery of the performance to be made.

The particular strategy for the research period, and the exercises and tasks I give the actors, are elements that change, determining a new adventure each time. The results of this work are often not included in the performance directly, but I know that the long itinerary and the intensity of certain moments become the lived experiences that allow everyone to have personal ownership of work that is collective.

In accordance with these general principles, I will try to synthesise (at the same time as attempting to protect the work from being described in a way that is inevitably schematic) the creative process of our last production, *The Belly of the Whale*.¹

THE STARTING POINT

The first motivation behind this performance was the necessity (and also the curiosity) to work only with the male actors in the group, a somewhat pedagogic urge. I have devoted a lot of time and many productions to the development of themes connected to the female world (*Canto di pietra*, *Pelle di lupo*, *Le ombre del silenzio*,

Sguardo di cenere), and I have often worked with mixed companies. The need to confront time, space and language only with men placed me in new, uncertain and open territory.

From the start I was clear that this project would be called *The Belly of the Whale*, without thinking about the content implied by this title or knowing how meaningful it would become for us.

The first ten days of work resulted in an alchemy that is difficult to describe: the enormous physicality, the intensity, strength, and first ingredients of sweetness and violence characterised all that followed. These expressions ended up fitting with my desire to make a work on war and violence, an idea that had been going around in my head for a long time. But I never spoke of this during the first months, even though it was certainly present in my associations when I developed and proposed exercises.

A HAPPY COINCIDENCE

Maria Porter's² presence during the first phases and her interest in following the research made me decide to leave the initial physical groundwork in her hands. Her excellent training in the Suzuki method remarkably enriched a particular use of the body that was drawn on subsequently in the performance. Not predetermined or planned, this became an enigmatic and rich, human and professional coincidence that cannot be explained logically.

THE STRATEGIC MAP

I believe it would be too boring to outline in

1. *The Belly of the Whale* was presented for the first time in Lugano, Switzerland, in November 2004. Daniel Bernardi, Simone Martino, Damian Soriano, Charles Verre and Freddy Virgolini participated in the process of creation. Bruna Gusberti followed the whole process, as co-trainer of the actors and assistant director. Maria Porter was valuable in different phases of the research and in some aspects of the physical training of the actors. Cristina Castrillo directed the work process and the performance and wrote the texts.

2. Maria Porter is an actress and lecturer at Long Island University in New York.

detail every task the actors confronted, and I am not sure that this would help the understanding of the process either. I prefer to concentrate on those proposals that particularly influenced the work, either because they brought us closer to the atmosphere and theme in question, or because they were decisive in the creation of certain characters and the weaving of the relationships that sprung from them.

I rarely asked for text, while most tasks included props and different ways of combining these objects in the space and/or with the body. Basically my choice of exercises was intended, as always, to elicit associations that possessed an obvious subjective and introspective nature.

1.

I placed many neutral, white masks with human features on the floor. Filled with faces lying on the ground, the space was strong and impressive. The actors had to elaborate an individual proposal in that space, with the restriction of touching and/or wearing only one of the masks. Subsequently the masks were moved to establish a new space and an environment in which each actor could elaborate further proposals.

We worked on building the space using the masks and integrating the other bodies and an object; it was a kind of 'painting' with bodies and masks. Each person confronted the other.

If I look back now at those images I cannot avoid strong feelings: none of that work is in the performance, but at the same time I know that, without that approach, the performance would not have become what it is.

Death and a compelling physicality between the actors were evident in the material. I was used to seeing those kinds of embraces and the ease of touching among

women; I was not expecting to see that same need burst forth impetuously in a group of males without it having been requested. This atmosphere, always on the edge between pain and care, gentleness and strength, accompanied all our work throughout the process.

The first clue for one of the characters arose from these early proposals: a man, half deformed and mad, and half hero.

2.

One of the few tasks that required using words included the masks. With blindfolded eyes each actor had the assignment of searching for "what I would say to the mask". When I asked each actor to choose one of his companions as recipient of the spontaneous speech, within a specific proposal, the words acquired significance.

The world of relationships took the upper hand. The Madman imposed his presence more insistently, and his relationship with another character, the strong and mighty one, was exposed with clarity. This relationship would become one of the fundamental pillars of the performance.

3.

On the basis of what they had experienced in the work until then, I asked the actors to bring in some images and photographs, perhaps taken from newspapers or magazines. We collected lots of images and many of them - mine included - reflected on violence and war. With great concentration, we made a detailed selection from the many photographs and marked those images that caught our attention. The images with more than three marks remained, and from these each actor chose one upon which to elaborate a scene.

This work definitely introduced us to the theme of violence and war, but always on a personal level. There were no general



Teatro delle Radici, *The Belly of the Whale*, directed by Cristina Castrillo. Photo: Krystyna Rezzonico

reflections, discussions, thematic or theoretical approaches; the situations 'happened' and many personal aspects were left exposed and fragile. A third character emerged decidedly through a gesture: a mute cry, a wide, open mouth that didn't end in sound. The development of this action produced the presence of the *desaparecido*.

4.

While the characters were becoming consistent and aspects of their relationships were being delineated, I asked the actors to bring a prop. Many actions and clues arose from the connection between the actors and their chosen object, even though not all of these have remained in the performance. We worked long hours individually, and sometimes the actors could make contact with

the others. The prop greatly helped to define each character's particularities and to accentuate the relationships.

It is perhaps interesting to give two small examples concerning the choice and use of the objects.

Secretly I had imagined that the Madman would have a sword, but instead he introduced a sink plunger. In the whole history of the Teatro delle Radici, no actor had ever proposed such a charmless and unpoetic object. I did not think that it would work, but I said nothing. Now that the performance is finished, I cannot conceive the Madman without his plunger.

The youngest of the actors brought a Jesuit robe; most of the elements of his character came out of contact with this costume. I remember my reaction on seeing

his finely built body, standing with open arms, wearing the robe the wrong way round, with his face covered by the hood. Six months later, the world's television showed us the images of the prisoners tortured at Abu Ghraib: one of them was frail, standing with open arms, his tunic the wrong way round, the hood covering his face.

At this stage not all the characters had emerged, and my biggest worry was how to succeed in having a kind of homogeneity without forcing the development. Most of all, I was filled with the sensations produced by what I had seen, and despite the richness of certain material, I was totally incapable of looking beyond those feelings. A centre, a heart on which to lean, was missing.

5.

Then the sacks arrived. I don't know exactly when I thought of them, when I 'saw' that the space should be covered with old jute sacks. We filled forty of them, and thirty-five have remained in the performance. All the exercises with the sacks were instructive and, almost magically, gave us the context for our work, in other words our "belly of the whale".

First - as previously with the masks - I put the sacks in regular rows covering the whole floor, leaving small corridors between each row where the actors could move freely. The effect was very strong, both for those who observed and those who participated. When I asked the actors to give me their impressions, everyone said, "the sacks were bodies", "we were surrounded by dead people".

This is how the core of our work emerged, and to identify a core, a centre, is much more decisive than ascertaining a theme. A theme, like "violence" or "war", can be a generic impulse on which to concentrate the first efforts, but until the pivot of the subject is found, the many

images created, the human consistency of the characters and their relationships can sail on without a precise reason. The sentence "our task is to bury the dead" unified and gave consistency to everything we had done before; it gave a future progression and a logic. From then on we concentrated on developing this context.

Many proposals were elaborated in relation to the sacks, which became the performance's only set, turning into walls, trenches and a nest. The shapes facilitated further associations and strengthened the relationships between the characters, their tensions, tenderness and violence, their impotence and dreams.

I looked at the characters without rationalising, only perceiving feelings and seeing their mute actions. To me, they seemed more eloquent than a text, but one character remained blocked, like a closed circuit with no way out. I therefore asked the actor to show me a proposal from what he considered essential in his work that I had not yet seen. He presented a sequence during which a long white ribbon unravelled from his mouth. In this simple way, the actor not only acquired a decisive role - the person who writes everyone's story - but also the ribbon became a metaphor for the whole performance.

6.

I left work with the doll until last, because of the different vision men have of this object. I often propose work with a doll in a training phase, and I have discovered that the kind of associations that are provoked in a woman don't change much if the doll in question is a little girl or a facsimile baby; the usual approach is related to maternity or childhood. For men it is different. In the material proposed by the actors and therefore in their associations, the doll 'was' a woman, a female, the other.

One of the most impressive exercises was perhaps the use of dismembered dolls (something that has remained in the performance). The active associations, the resulting scenes and the feelings of the actors were a corollary to the whole process.

So, after a year of work (with monthly meetings of ten to fifteen days) I found myself with an enormous quantity of gestures, actions, situations, objects, character clues and some text. For a year I watched and guided without too much pressure, I gave specific tasks that allowed for the evolution of early information or the development of other issues. My function was to look, and be able to see and to grasp.

After that year I felt that I was full and rich, but impatient. It was then that the snake-question began to hiss: "What will I do with all this?" This moment is terrible, I would almost say full of anguish; I know that it is the moment that precedes the beginning of the montage and elaboration of the text. During the long preparatory process I have not written a line; I am not able to, I don't know how to, it's too early.

In fact I know that the logic of a performance is built through the personal associations I have while looking at the actors. I have never given suggestions about "what kind of character you should create", or "what your reality should be in the performance", etc. The fulcrum of everything is what really and actually happened between the actors and between them and me.

I feel like a privileged go-between: between the actors and the words that will come, between the actors and their hidden world, between their feelings and mine, between us and the recipients (or spectators), between personal and individual worlds and the public world, between the microcosm and the macrocosm.

THE MONTAGE

I cannot separate directing from writing; these functions must be coupled, fused, they complete each other. I don't know when the decision to begin building the performance happens, but there is a point when I feel I have to. Probably it is when I realise that all the actors, despite having been focused on themselves for too long, succeed in perceiving a kind of general plot and have a common ownership and feeling for the story to be told. It is when the actors integrate everyone's particularities and the story has become important to everyone.

As stated above, at this point I have infinite details and information, and above all some general lines concerning the relationships between the characters. I certainly have a core, a centre, which is the logic to which I cling and which could be defined as the subject matter. To respond to it, the subject matter does not have to be obvious, rather it is a deep-rooted inner guide that determines the next steps. Similarly, it is decisive for me to foresee the opening image.

To begin to make a montage means to begin to write; to elaborate sequences of the performance piece by piece, (sometimes only three minutes long), and to do the same with the text. I don't ask myself what happens next, I don't have a general structure, I assemble and write.

Given the subject of the work, one of the biggest difficulties has been to avoid, in the action as in the words, a rhetorical and easy denunciation, an obvious public statement. (How does one speak of horror when it is daily media-fodder?) We had to strip away all the fat, to search for the essential, for that which is personally acceptable and believable, to rid ourselves of the weight of the inevitable moral judgment and move towards poetry, which bears images and words that don't explain, but only suggest.

I experienced the preliminary work

so intensely that my writing responds to the inner associations I had while watching and reacting to the personal material proposed by the actors. The actions, movements and images always lead my writing. Writing is seeing: I write imagining the actions to be done, I write within a context I shape and that is reaffirmed the following day in the practical work. I don't think an actor has ever found the structures I proposed forced, distant or inappropriate.

So I build piece by piece with actions and text; even when I use no words and make a montage of a physical score, it is as if I were writing.

This period is my kingdom and my burden. I don't have examples that have the concreteness of an exercise, or a formula. How can one explain why these words come and not those? How can I explain that I can spend as many hours searching for the definition of a gesture as for the use of a word? Perhaps writing is a theme in itself, but I cannot separate it from my way of making the montage of a performance. I only know that this constant and insidious state of mind is full of solitary emotions, while I walk up and down my corridor at home muttering sentences that come into my mouth and that mean something to me, continuously sharpening the same pencil (that is how I write) and sticking masses of papers with information, gestures, suggestions, drawings, around my desk. As when I was a little girl and learned the first movements of chess, I

cut out little pieces of cardboard in the shape of jute sacks and I play with them on the surface of a small table.

Translated from Italian by Julia Varley

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