

# Raquel Carrió

## Language, Words and Dramaturgy

### A Chinese Story<sup>1</sup>

Some years ago I read a book entitled *How to Tell a Story* by Gabriel García Márquez, the Colombian author of *A Hundred Years of Solitude*. At the beginning I thought that it was a book of narrative theory and technique, but I then discovered that it was a summary of short stories collected at workshops that Márquez leads at the Latin American School of Cinema in Cuba.

The various stories were very different from each other (people from many countries and continents and not only from Latin America study at the School), but they had something in common: all of them were an alluvium of words, words, words... that did not have an impact on the reader. However, starting from these stories, the teacher's technique was quite particular: at the end of each reading, he asked the other participants what the story was about. Another inundation of words began - much longer than the story itself - to re-tell or to try to explain the narrative of the story; and very little resulted from this verbal labyrinth. The story got more and more entangled until it became unrecognisable and nobody knew anymore what happened in it. At this point the teacher's work began: what was the red thread that would take us back to the fable? Why were so many words necessary to explain what should be captured as a sequence of the story's actions and images? Could anyone reproduce all the story's words? Could anyone remember them? Surely not! Nobody remembered the words. But nevertheless some images had been imprinted in the mind of the listeners: these images were the essence of the story. Basically, they were visions of the space, locations, characters and the relationships among them. They were what the others received and retained as the (physical and mental) *experience* of the reading. And if that is so, then what use do words have in writing?

*How can you speak a text by Calderón, Zorrilla or Lorca - and worse still if dealing with translations from other languages into Spanish - if the way of speaking on this other side of the world is different from that part of the world in which the text was originally written? The way of articulating words is different, but, most of all the rhythm, the intonation, the sense of movement, gesture and action is different.*



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1. This article is taken from a lecture given at "Stories to be told": Transit 5 International Women's Theatre Festival in Holstebro, Denmark, January 2007.

I like the question because it leads us to something *real* in the experience of theatre: when we leave a theatre nobody remembers the totality - not even half - of the words spoken and heard during the performance. However, actions, places and characters stay in our mind; they become a part of our imagery and our life and work experience.

Does this mean that we could eliminate words from theatre and only keep the action, space, gestures, ways of looking, movements, which is to say, the visual and sound or musical universe of the stage? This has been done many times, but such experiences have not always really contributed to the clarification of the specific relationship of words and stage images or, more precisely, of the written, read or heard word and the visual and sound dimension of a performance.

In principle, this has to do with the artificial separation between text and representation that we have inherited. Since printing was invented - even though we don't like to admit it - theatre is probably read more than it is seen (how many have read *Romeo and Juliet*, or *Blood Wedding*, without ever having seen a performance of these plays? And in many cases doesn't the representational experience of the works correspond to film rather than theatre?). It is most important to underline that this dichotomy has diverted Theatre Studies from what we could call - following the experience of Rimbaud in poetry - the notion of an alchemy of the verb based on the fundamental notion that the word in theatre is above all aural material, an architecture of sounds and signs that remains caught up by literature only for a practical utility of fixation (and re-presentation).

I mention Rimbaud because he had a clear intuition of the essential nature of the poetic act: poetry as illumination, as shards or removed fragments of what is real that in turn generates - or discovers - other areas of

reality or thought. More than illustrating, Rimbaud's poetry (or Elliot's, Kavafis', Lorca's, Neruda's and others') makes the perceptions explode, that is to say, it creates parallel or alternative, superimposed realities, which equal the discovery or revelation of something hidden, occult or unknown.

So writing is above all an action of fixing, a means by which an experience - that by its own nature is not written, but sensorial, emotional, visual, olfactory and aural - is fixed on paper, written down as a means of preservation and transmission.

As we know, poetry (not only lyrical, but also epic poetry and with it the narrative roots of drama) was sung originally. From that it preserves its musicality but also the capacity to narrate by transforming into visual and sound material a lived or imagined personal or collective experience where writing is the support, the graph, that catches and fixes that ephemeral experience. If we think this way, the written text is, of course, simultaneously the jail and preservation of the (mental or stage) image. Then the profession of reading - and most of all of re-presenting what is written - becomes an act of liberation - liberation of the images, actions and the characters' relationships to create new perceptions and meanings. It is this liberation that allows different dramaturgies and performances to derive from identical words in the same text.

Obviously, I work with a concept of playwriting and dramaturgy that relates to the etymological origins of the term: the composition or disposition of actions in the textual or stage space. But this generates other implications: if writing is the enciphered language of image, the (graphic and sound) structure that contains the *explosion* of perceptions, the *poetic* element, is not the word as such, but what escapes it, what separates and illuminates an angle, a relationship or an unforeseen interpretation of reality. So,

if I say: "the blue house", each reader or listener (actor, director or spectator) shoots off their own perception of the shape and colour of the house, and if I add: "is on fire", the flames should inflame the imagination of the recipient as if they were real.

I have tried to summarise what I consider fundamental in my theatre and teaching work. For more than twenty years I have taught a seminar in Dramaturgy at the Theatre Faculty of the University of Arts in Cuba, and at the same time I work as a literary adviser and playwright at Teatro Buendía, a group founded in 1985 with graduate students of the Faculty.

I have always thought that Teatro Buendía is for me a laboratory for research which concerns the relationships between words and stage images, and I would like to explain why I felt the need to conceive this work as a laboratory practice and not only or mainly as a theoretical reflection. To be clear, a lot of theory is created about theory; which means that most of the investigations of theatre language or of the complex relationships between text and stage are the result of a meticulous and generally academic observation, but almost always from the point of view of theoretical reflection on practice and not from practice itself.

Maybe this is the reason why actors generally feel uncomfortable with a text that they want to reflect on, understand, meditate over, but that doesn't always find correspondences in their own perceptions. Certainly this is what the director is there for: so that she or he *thinks* what the actor will *do*. But it is rather sad, not to say sick, that it should be so: why should a person who has to speak and act in front of the spectator not reflect and understand? For years this contradiction has obsessed me and Flora Lauten, the director of Teatro Buendía, with whom I work.

Everybody speaks of a body memory, a

sensorial language, etc. These expressions have been made into formulas that are repeated both in theory and in practice. But what do they really mean? How do you solve these issues practically during the work on words, voice and movement? How do you solve them to produce something that is not false, forced or simply an illustration of what is written?

These are general questions, valid anywhere, but in countries like Cuba - and likewise in all Latin American and Caribbean countries that have a colonial inheritance - the problem of language is essential. How can you speak a text by Calderón, Zorrilla or Lorca - and worse still if dealing with translations from other languages into Spanish - if the way of speaking on this other side of the world is different from that part of the world in which the text was originally written? The way of articulating words is different, but, most of all the rhythm, the intonation, the sense of movement, gesture and action is different. If you don't solve this problem - at the practical level of playwriting and dramaturgy - the artificial separation between writing (of the text) and representation, which is to say the discordance between the word (as the act of speaking) and the action, is reproduced again and again on stage, because in the text the word is the carrier of the image, but on stage word is a component of the image, and the spectator is not - and should not be - an obsessive researcher of this relationship. The spectator wants to perceive the text *through* the image and not in conflict with or separated from it.

In the face of this, historically, there have been two positions in Latin America. The first one is the clumsy imitation of the foreign models that gave and still give unbearably false and artificial productions: the theatre that works with the norm of

written language and not the colloquial speech of America. But the second position, which we usually find more amusing, generally limits itself to reproducing the norm of speech, which is to say, to produce a native-vernacular theatre that has aged prodigiously in the last decades.

The conflict is very complex: you inherit a language, a dramatic literature, forms of writing and a heap of words (and stories) in a place where no one ever spoke in that way; where a different way of talking was forged that really corresponds to the ways of moving, walking, breathing, gesticulating, etc., characteristic of that place. This is the true meaning of cultural syncretism: not the mixture itself, as is sometimes believed, but the language qualities or particularities that the mixing generates.

This is not a theoretical problem for us in Teatro Buendía. From the theoretical point of view, the answers are known. The problem is concrete: how can the actor find a use of the word that doesn't betray his or her own rhythm, his or her own sense of movement and gestures, his or her own melody, without being condemned to a vernacular parody (already so exhausted) or to a simple illustration.

At the beginning, as a group we tried to define ourselves by investigating our Latin American and Caribbean cultural inheritance and roots. We didn't want to make either a theatre of European imitation or a folklorist one. We wanted to make theatre that spoke about the process of the trans-culture of European and African origin, not creating a pastiche of both (or of more, since we should also include Chinese, Arab, Jewish origins, etc.), but distilling - it is a chemical, laboratory term - a language that characterises us. It would do so because the

language (or the language we wished to achieve) would be born organically from a body that remembers, that is a repository of an occult, submerged culture and memory that is often in contradiction with literature, with the written word. This contradiction generates a tension, a paradox, on which we work.

In fact, what I describe is a typical counter-culture phenomenon (or confrontation of different cultural canons). But we try to work on it not only in the field of ideas or of themes, but in the specific field of language.

It took my group years of work - perhaps the first ten - to discover this, which is so simple to say, but so difficult to put in practice. I believe that it was about 1997 or 1998 - when we premiered the performance *Another Tempest* - that I understood that the centre of the investigations was no longer only the myths, the traditions, the legends and the stories produced by the phenomena of trans-culture and syncretism in the Caribbean, but in fact how to find a language (words and images) with which to narrate this experience, not at the level of the great historical narrations, but at the level of the internal processes of the actor's body and voice as an expression of the multicultural, syncretic imagination that cannot be reduced to pre-established formulas.

From this point of view, voice was, and continues to be, for us, the most difficult field of work. Without a doubt it was - is in our case - a croaky voice, coming from very far away in time and place, from the wood of the ships that accumulate years, hangovers, tempests, cracks, crashes and shipwrecks. It is, indeed, a broken voice; broken by the humidity and the persistent proximity of the sea and the salt: *island voices*, characteristic of island creatures.<sup>2</sup> The

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2. Reference to Dulce María Loynaz's poem of the same title: *Island Creatures*, in *Poesía completa*, Havana, Editorial Arte y Literatura, 1980.

easiest thing would have been to give up words or to adopt already established teaching models. But I think that Flora tried to propose a different kind of research. So then instead of making the actor reproduce the written text (of a classic or contemporary author from Cuba or any other place), I tried to work in an opposite direction: to let the text speak as each actor spoke, to reinvent the space and re-model the word in accordance with the function of the characters and of the relationships created among them *but inserted or from within their own space*.

This means that I always begin to work the playwriting-dramaturgy from the space itself; from an analogy that traces the correspondences between the writing and the space of the action, between the words fixed in the text and the images that are being shaped on stage seen as angles, corners, fragments, dark areas and shards that reveal an *identity*.

To capture these mostly fleeting or enigmatic gleams, fragments and mutations is the craft that I have chosen in theatre, riding in between word and image, searching for the conversion of one into the other, even though this alchemist's job makes me continuously re-write my signs during the long rehearsal processes while the director, the actors and the musicians propose more and more possible variants of each scenario. Our common area is the space.

Actions and unforeseen relationships can arise, sometimes quite distant from the initial text. What links them is that *place*, that analogical, metaphoric space, from which the revealing of submerged relationships is invoked.

For example, in *Another Tempest* (a version of Shakespeare's *Tempest* based on songs, dances and stories - the so called *patakkines* - from the Yoruba and Arara

cultures of the Caribbean) the generative space is the Island: the island as labyrinth, as place of meetings, crossings and illusions between the European navigators and the gods of the island; in *La vida en rosa*, the space is the Cuban cabaret; in *Bacantes*, the walls of the City destroyed by war and exile; in *La comparsa*, the carnival and in *Charenton*, a basement of a hospice for mad people as an analogy of our own work place. In every case, the text is read and re-written only starting from that *space* - conceived as an *aleph* where all the times and places fit - in search of a playwriting-dramaturgy that narrates from inside, from evocation, complicity or rejection.

We always ask ourselves what relationship exists between a physical space from which, through the character, an emotion, a memory or an impulse is evoked, and the word that is born not as illustration or articulation of an idea, but as an intimate and unknown resonance of that feeling or impulse.

It would be too lengthy to describe here how we worked on *La otra tempestad*, *Bacantes*, *La vie en rose*, *El paraíso verde* or *Charenton*, but I will give an example using a Chinese story as a form of research and dramaturgical exercise.

There is an old legend from the Port of Havana that tells the story of a woman called Palm. The palm tree is a national symbol in Cuba. The book that tells this story is entitled *El Chino* (The Chinese) in which its author, Carlos Felipe, wrote these strange stories that he picked up out of the twilight world of Havana, in the 1950s and 1960s. They are usually set in the bars of the Port, the old town streets and brothels: transitional places of cultural crossings, of difficult, ephemeral and violent relationships. The setting is very interesting, but the language is terrible.

The author wants to work with the way



Raquel Carrió. Photo: Rossella Viti

of talking, with the colloquial language, of these simple and marginal people that live around the Port, bars and brothels. But at the same time, he wants to give a poetic dimension to these silenced, hidden, and supposedly story-less, voices. The result is that his language is contaminated with melodrama, street vulgarity and shapeless passion. His characters are strong, but the language they speak de-characterises them: they sound ridiculous and laughable. He tries to make serious literature, to narrate these stories, starting from materials that are condemned to be grotesque and produce exaggerated cartoon types by the polarity that establishes the norm of language for erudite theatre and the vulgar talk for popular theatre.

How can we break this barrier, this dichotomy that is reproduced, again and again, in our cultures? In this case, the story

is very simple. And I begin working on the story or, more precisely, on the time-space structure of the story taking from the source-text what I consider essential for the work of re-contextualisation and re-modelling (or bringing up to date) of the fable.

This is what is left: a woman has been married for a long time. Suddenly her husband decides to leave Havana to work in a country where they will have better living conditions (exile for economic reasons is a serious problem in Cuba, and in Latin America). But Palm doesn't want to leave, because more than twenty years ago, when she was very young, she met a solitary, sad man in a park. He was a sailor. He was called the Mexican and he was passing through Havana. They had a brief conversation. It began to rain and he took her to a place where they could be together. It was a brothel in Old Havana, called Chinese because the owner was Chinese, in the worst neighbourhood of the Port. They spent time together and the Sailor promised her he would return in twenty days. Twenty years passed and the Mexican never returned. Palm went back to the place many times but nobody remembered anything. One day they demolished the brothels of the Port. Only the ruins are left. This is the point of departure and the space that I chose for the reconstruction of the story.

Palm imposes a condition on her husband, if she is to leave with him - she wants him to look for the characters of the brothel and reconstruct the story, just as it happened on the original night. She wants to know if the others remember, if the story really happened, or if she only dreamed it. They manage to find the characters: the Chinese owner of the brothel; Renata the Silent, who cleaned the place; the prostitutes; and somebody who substitutes for the violinist who committed suicide that night. They reach the ruins of the brothel.

Nothing exists, but they have written a script with the essential actions of the story. They begin to prepare the *place*. One of the prostitutes sings a song. The others follow her. Suddenly red lights begin to come on. The stones, the screens, the fans and the Chinese lanterns return to their place. The brothel is there in all its splendour. The live sound of the violin is heard. The Chinese owner, Renata the Silent and the prostitutes, Faith, Hope and Charity, remember the gestures and then the words. We don't know if they are the same words or not. But suddenly the Mexican appears: magic, sorcery, power of invocation? The Mexican is an old man now, nothing like the beautiful sailor that Palm remembered. But the

Las Palabras Perdidas

I

Me voy y no regreso.  
La pequeña estrella  
que ha entrado en mi casa  
no hará que los años vuelvan atrás.  
Cuando tenía los ojos más verdes,  
caminaba la ciudad  
y escribía en el aire las palabras.  
A dónde fueron las palabras:  
manos, cuerpos, figuras en el sueño  
recorriendo las calles,  
el hambre de las calles,  
todo el horror y el asco de mi corazón  
como si fuera amor,  
como si alguien hubiera levantado  
esa primera piedra para mí.

II

Pero no era así.  
El niño que caminaba sobre mí  
era una sombra.  
No tenía voz, ni rostro,  
ni siquiera un nombre.  
Hijo no es un nombre:  
sólo un deseo que no termina.

emotion is intact.

What has really happened? The word created the image, but the power of the image made the words flow freely, as fragments to a magnet that has the real intensity for the construction of a character.

I believe that this exercise of words and dramaturgy in space always accompanies us. Although it seems strange, it is almost a work methodology. Perhaps for that reason, if it were not too disrespectful to methodologies, this article should be called "Brothel: a study of passion through language". In conclusion, here is a poem written by Palm, the character in the story, as a bolero song for the beginning of *Brothel*.

*The Lost Words*

I

*I leave and won't return.  
The small star  
that has entered my home  
Won't make the years turn back.  
When I had the greenest eyes  
I walked the city  
and wrote words in the air.  
Where did the words go:  
hands, bodies, figures from a dream  
walking the streets,  
the hunger of the streets,  
all my heart's horror and disgust  
as if it were love,  
as if somebody had lifted  
that first stone for me.*

II

*But it was not like this.  
The child that walked over me  
was a shade.  
It didn't have a voice, or a face,  
not even a name.  
Son is not a name:  
only a wish that doesn't end.*

Un hilo rojo.  
El rastro.  
El arrecife comiéndote por dentro.  
La noche cayendo lentamente.  
Y en eso las Voces:  
- no lo he visto  
- no sé quién es  
- tiene los ojos pequeños  
y las manos muy grandes  
- no quiero  
- es tu saliva, tu piel  
- el tiempo en que viviste.  
Las calles, la ciudad -

III  
Amanecer mirando el mar.  
La ciudad que se derrumba  
y en el centro  
LAS PALABRAS PERDIDAS:  
ésta es tu casa, tu lengua,  
tu historia:  
el tiempo en que buscabas  
el amor y los sonidos,  
el hilo de sangre que dejaste,  
la piedra donde guardas  
el rostro, la nostalgia.  
Barcos que pasan. -¿El / Ella?  
Nunca vas a saber.  
Sólo que esa pequeña estrella,  
tan joven que parece un niño,  
ha viajado mil años  
para llegar hasta aquí.

*A red thread.  
The rake.  
The reef eating you up inside.  
The night falling slowly.  
And then the Voices:  
- I haven't seen him  
- I don't know who he is  
- he has small eyes  
and very big hands  
- I don't want this  
- it's your saliva, your skin  
- the time in which you lived.  
The streets, the city -*

III  
*Dawn, looking at the sea.  
The city that collapses  
and at the centre  
THE LOST WORDS:  
this is your home, your language,  
your story:  
the time when you looked for  
love and sounds,  
the line of blood that you left,  
the stone where you keep  
the face, the nostalgia.  
Ships that pass. - Him / Her?  
You'll never know.  
Only that this small star,  
so young that it seems a child,  
has travelled a thousand years  
to arrive down here.*

Translated from Spanish by Julia Varley

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