

Yamile Lanchas

Just Like Home

*To my grandmother Yamyle,
who gave me my name
among other priceless gifts.*

*Ya son las cinco de la mañana por el oriente ya sale el sol,
y en altas cumbres de las montañas
se ve el reflejo del arrebol.¹*

17th century Colombian Christmas carol

My great grandmother Clemencia, who was born amid the deep mountain chains of Colombia at the end of 1800, learned this Christmas carol from her mother, the daughter of Captain Girón, companion in arms of Simón Bolívar in their fight for Colombian independence from the Spaniards.

A Christmas carol passed from generation to generation thanks to women born to Spaniards and their aboriginal wives: my great grandmother bore in her face aboriginal traits mixed with the strong, haughty character of her Spanish ancestors.

Clemencia married Tanios, a Lebanese adventurer, who arrived in the Caribbean by ship at the beginning of 1900. My great-grandfather entered the Americas by way of Venezuela. He was seeking a better life in the New World and, travelling south, he succeeded in opening a clothes emporium, like most of his Arab countrymen. Already in Colombia he arrived by chance in a tiny hamlet, Soatá, lost in the beautiful mountains of Boyacá; he decided to give up his wanderings and established his home there.

The story goes that his brother, Bshara Faris, Tanios' faithful travelling companion, who would remain forever a confirmed bachelor, did not understand why they had to live in that tiny, hopeless hamlet and firmly refused to stay, until one day my great-grandfather, in his calm way, led him by the hand to a treasure he had found in Soatá's square: a date

My grandmother becomes quite beautiful herself when she sings: all her sorrow, her memories of those dreams that never came true, all her pessimism of many years vanish when a song comes to her lips. Something beautifies her when she lets go, the song chooses her and I have come to realise that those words sung almost unconsciously during the day are very telling: they are messages that come from the soul, feelings and desires that would never rise to the surface otherwise.

1. "It is already five in the morning and the sun is rising in the east, and the red glow can be seen reflected on the mountain tops."

Theatre Women Song - Yamile Lanchas



Yamile Feres Ojeda. Photo: Stefan Pohl Valeno

palm tree! (A very particular climate is needed for dates to grow.) Bshara's eyes lit up with joy, he was almost moved to tears and he said: "It's like home!" So, they stayed.

That was the end of their travels. Tanios married my great-grandmother Clemencia and they had seven children. Led by his wife he learned Spanish so well that he used to correct the letters he received from his sons and send them back for future improvement. Bshara never learned Spanish and almost forgot Arabic, but he managed his salt mine at Chita and lent a hand in the book-keeping.

They sold everything, literally everything, in their warehouse; my grandmother Yamyle was the first to talk to me about it, her eyes full of nostalgia and emotion. As a little girl there she would secretly eat expensive French almonds and touch the silk clothes brought from China.

All sorts of rare items came from exotic lands and it took months for them to reach that little nook nestled in the middle of inaccessible mountains on the back of a mule, the only animal able to climb the bottomless precipices unscathed. And it was on a mule's back that the German piano was brought to Soatá, where my grandmother learned her first songs and the old Christmas carol.

She had dreams and imagined herself as a famous actress and singer, but in the Colombia of the 1930s this was thought improper for young ladies from good families. My grandmother had to resign herself to playing a role in *Colombina and Pierrot* in the town square with her friends, always influenced by the fashions coming from France and Italy years late; or to sing romantic tunes, with piano accompaniment, from the zarzuelas brought and performed by Spanish companies.

Her voice, a 'soprano spinta', penetrating but sweet, soared over the tired

voices of young girls attending parish masses. Her passionate and emotional voice carried with intensity, so much so, that the parish priest, the Right Honourable Peñuela, warned her sternly at the church entrance: "If you persist in singing like that in the House of the Lord, I will excommunicate you." (Years later he would try to do so again, without success, because she and her two sisters were the first to have and ride a bicycle in Soatá). So my grandmother decided to give free rein to her voice only while going for walks on her father's farm, *El Arenal*, and quite softly while she performed daily chores in the house.

Years later song would be her only emotional outlet when she had to face facts that overwhelmed her. She was still very young when she heard of her husband's death and total numbness struck her; but while they were holding the wake at their home she started singing uncontrollably the habanera *Un viejo amor*:

*Que un viejo amor, ni se olvida ni se deja
que un viejo amor,
de nuestra alma si se aleja
pero nunca dice adiós, un viejo amor...*

(An old love, is not forgotten nor forsaken,
An old love does leave our soul,
but never says farewell, an old love...)

The visitors were so moved that Doctor Díaz had to give her a tranquilising injection, leaving her dumbstruck, avoiding the uncontrolled torrent of emotions that only a song could bring to the surface.

The life women led in the era of my great-grandmother and grandmother was full of chores from early morning to late at night in order to keep the household running like clockwork. Unlike today, when pressing a button does the work, it involved dusting enormous colonial houses;

starching and ironing immaculate white shirts; skilfully finding the exact heating point for fig marmalade; and avoiding an excessive taste of nutmeg in the *kibbe* (a traditional Lebanese dish made of wheat, mixed meat and herbs).

Some of these apparently trivial and facile tasks, even when carried out with the utmost efficiency, could mean a real nightmare for the rest of the household: the highest standards of perfection and the feared directions of my grandmother "not THAT way, THIS way!" were only relaxed when the miracle occurred. She started singing unexpectedly, put aside for an instant what she was doing and gazed intently at the distant horizon; then she appeared as if surrounded by a magic and magnetic halo and the song came out of her mouth as if from a spring.

*Loca, me llaman mis amigos,
que sólo son testigos de mi liviano amor,
loca, qué saben lo que siento,
ni qué remordimiento,
se oculta en mi interior?*

(My friends call me mad,
witnesses only of my frail love,
mad, what do they know of what I feel,
what remorse is hidden inside me?)

A couplet written in 1922 that was perhaps a clear hint of the burning desire she felt to be just what she was, without so many restraints... just a little measure of madness would have helped all those women to be happier... then she resumed what she was doing and the song kept her company filling everything with ease and grace that vanquished the feared "THIS way!", thus giving the others a good measure of personal freedom to decide the best way to cut a tomato.

As a little girl I deemed it quite normal

to sing while I was busy doing things, thus imitating my grandmother, but, as I did not know the lyrics of songs, I just hummed, la,la,la,la,la, without stopping. Once, while trying to open my doll Elsa's eye with the aid of a fork, I learned to add words to my music talking to Elsa who was now blind in one eye:

Abre el ojito, mijita, Elsita...

(Open your little eye, my dear little Elsie...)

Once I heard my grandmother sing while she watered her plants. "Why are you singing to the flowers?" I asked her. "I sing to them to make them grow beautiful," she answered. Not just to make them grow, but to make them grow beautiful.

My grandmother becomes quite beautiful herself when she sings: all her sorrow, her memories of those dreams that never came true, all her pessimism of many years vanish when a song comes to her lips. Something beautifies her when she lets go, the song chooses her and I have come to realise that those words sung almost unconsciously during the day are very telling: they are messages that come from the soul, feelings and desires that would never rise to the surface otherwise.

Thus, my grandmother's songs came to my mother in the form of those emphatic Mexican ranch-songs that really suited her rather imposing ways: a guitar and

*Este amor apasionado, está todo alborotado,
por volver, voy camino a la locura,
y aunque todo me tortura, se perder...
y volver, volver, volver,
a tus brazos otra vez...*

(This passionate love of mine is so eager
to return,
I'm on the verge of sheer madness,

and though it means nothing but torture,
I'm quite a good loser...
and I return, return, return,
to your arms once again...)

My Colombian-Lebanese mother marries a Spaniard from Galicia who plays Chopin passionately on the piano, as easily as he sings a Galician air:

*A Virxe de Guadalupe cando vai
pola ribeira,
descalciña pola area parece una Rianxeira...*

(When the Virgin of Guadalupe walks
along the sea-shore,
bare-footed on the sand
she seems a true girl from Rianxo...)

I could feel a great harmony at home when they sang together. So it was inevitable: seeing the adults at home happy and fulfilled when they were singing made me an actress (the kind that sings), and one of my brothers an opera singer.

We both experienced the transition from "living to sing" to "singing for a living"; that is to say the process of turning what you do naturally into a profession, aided by the fearsome but unavoidable technique.

I call it fearsome technique, because you often have to give a name to what you already know, risking thereby invalidating and blocking the natural knowledge in the process, and starting to look for strange things, that however seem to be essential, like singing through your ribs (!!!) or as if you were yawning... Ah! I never yawn when I sing!

But time teaches you how to reach a balance that amounts to this: singing technique has some basic principles, but it is never general; it is on the contrary, quite personal, like a pair of old shoes that seem

to be part of your feet. If you already have a natural opening, why would you want to yawn? But if you are acting for the first time, nerves will close your throat and make those 'easy' notes refuse to come out.

The technical tricks help you to be conscious of your body and recognise that you lack space; then you try to yawn, the throat opens itself and the technique works.

When you sing from pure joy, there is enough breath to finish all the strophes; but when you are on stage and become over-aware of the text, the breath falls short; when you quarrel with your partner you expound your point of view in an enormous paragraph without pausing for breath; but the phrase "to be or not to be" will leave you gasping for air...

My brother and I, as professional colleagues, often share our experiences. He shows me his buffo character, Don Bartolo, in Rossini's *Barber of Seville*; his bass voice is supple and light and has a natural facility to tackle such a difficult aria as *A un dottor della mia sorte* with ease and swiftness. But all of a sudden he asks: "What do you do when you sing?" I tried to give him an intensive class on physical actions but end up by confusing him even more, as if he had said to me: "Open your glottis, raise the soft palate and take air out of the sound..." What?

So he forces me to be clear and simple: all the clues for action are in the text. Before singing "*Perché manca là quel foglio?*" (Why is there a piece of paper missing?) what do you do? Ah! I look for the missing leaf! I then tell him the big secret: look for the verbs in the text; they are the keys for action.

I go on: "When you say to Rosina: '*ferma là, non mi toccate!*' (Stay there, don't touch me!) you will have to get your colleague to collaborate with you. She has to come close to you first, so that you can

reject her, otherwise there is no action." No doubt the great challenge for opera singers is to master all these tiny details in the two weeks of rehearsals.

He also helps me with valuable hints when I ask him: "What should I do with this Kurt Weil song *Youkali*, as I feel my voice falls short?" I expect a whole treatise on the intricacies of song but the answer is: "Just open your mouth more!"

I once invited my brother to work with our group and told him to watch our physical training and then sing with us. After an hour he stands up patiently; we were all sweating; he opens his mouth and the sound comes out smoothly like a river of hot chocolate. "If you can talk, you can sing," he says with a smile. We open our eyes wide and ask: "But... do opera singers practise physical training?" "Yes!" he answered, "some of them cook spaghetti and others wear Adidas for rehearsals... Can you imagine two big, fat famous opera singers in black shorts like you, rolling over impersonating animals and then singing an opera?"

I see his big body with its expanded chest; he has never in his life done any physical exercise, but he is able to withstand endless operatic marathons, sing and move at the same time; he has an innate connection with his voice, which is greatly improved by a technique that enables him to sing over a grand orchestra. He once said to me that off stage he feels like a walking penguin, but once he is on stage singing, he feels like the same penguin but in water, at ease, swimming with agility and feeling at home there.

The myth that voice cannot emerge without previous exhausting physical training ceased to exist for me from that day. Training can certainly be helpful, but it is by no means the key to the voice. One thing is clear: do not go to opera waiting for a physical display or to the theatre waiting

for a Callas vocal performance... These are quite distinct techniques.

My brother and I agree, nevertheless, on one vital point: when the voice comes out in that magical way it is because it is connected with what you are; and you will never find your own voice if you have not discovered the joy and pleasure of being alive.

We both have a common and valuable heritage: singing is the very dimension of life; this is the soul language that comes out as a matter of course. The voices of my great-great-grandmother, great-grandmother, grandmother and mother will re-echo in that Christmas carol that, whenever it is sung, contains one of those deep joys that also allows tears.

I sing and know who those who preceded me were; I sing and know who I am.

How to possess that magic? How to transmit emotions? What is the secret? Maybe no more than feeling at home inside yourself and then, just singing.

Translated from Spanish by Felipe Lanchas

YAMILE LANCHAS (Colombia/Spain) was born in 1975 in Bogotá and now lives in Barcelona. She is an actress and musician, founder and director of the group Teatro Scivias and of the cultural Association Agora Teatral. She is a voice teacher, as well as a teacher of Hatha yoga and a Shiatsu therapist.
www.agorateatral.com