

# Iben Nagel Rasmussen

## Fragments of an Actor's Diary

*But is it possible - I ask myself - to talk about Eik, about drugs, about the sixties in a theatre performance? How can it be at all possible to talk about something which is so closely woven into my own person without becoming banal, pathetic, sentimental or much too direct and personal?*

### VIENNA 1989

We are on tour with Odin Teatret's performance Talabot. Every morning I walk to the theatre to "train". The training consists of preparing scenes and fragments for a new production. I have asked Kai (Bredholt) to participate as a musician. He plays the accordion, sings - is my boyfriend - and is not connected to the theatre. For a long time I have wanted to develop physical scores/actions in relation to music. In my suitcase I have a tape he has recorded. Some of the songs are about the sea. At the end of the tape there are sounds of sea and waves, a recording we made at the beach the evening before I left. I still do not know what the theme of the new production should be. Perhaps it has something to do with the sea and with a drowned person.

I have a recurring nightmare: two minutes before the performance starts, my costume is un-ironed and it is not even the right costume, it belongs to another show. The public is waiting, my lines are not right and the props have either fallen apart or are wrong. I want to use the nightmare's logic in the new work. I want to mix together costumes and characters from earlier productions.

### THE TRAINING ROOM

It is half past seven in the morning. It is quiet here and the room is empty, apart from a chair with my costumes and props. The morning light flows in through a window. Where shall I begin? I tie the two ends of a long coloured elastic bandage to the training room's door-handle. In my mouth the bandage becomes a bit. I try to move forwards. The bit / elastic bandage stretches, it becomes so long that it nearly fills the whole room. This image gives me associations of scenes I played in the streets a long time ago. I imagine that the bandage will later be held by Kai. Right now I can hear the sound of his accordion from the tape-recorder playing a Jewish melody which expresses longing. The space opens up and I slowly remember as if in



a dream: the towns and places we passed with our parades, Odin Teatret's and my own youth. Street after street, roof-tops, balconies, cornices. I remember the position of the drumsticks I played with, how my body stretched out, ran and cringed; the cries - mute now - to the people in the street and houses, or to the other parade characters with drums, trumpets and stilts. We had so much power, and used it, in the wild flight towards ourselves. I fix my actions (my score), I write it down in a notebook and draw a sketch of how I could imagine Kai placed. Tomorrow I will repeat the whole thing.

Jan (Ferslev, musician and actor at Odin Teatret) has recorded a guitar composition of his on another tape. Jan is also on tour, but he is not supposed to be in this new production. Together we had fixed a part of my physical actions with his guitar playing. Each little fragment fits with a melody line: closeness, tenderness, sensuality. The actions are soft and delicate, containing an inward sweetness so different from the outgoing strength of the elastic bandage scene. I hardly move in the space. It is a small body-poem with guitar accompaniment.

I choose the Japanese fan amongst the props on the chair and I put on the tape with the sound of the sea. The score with the Japanese fan is of an earlier date, its rhythm is more dramatic and its movements change from slow panning to fast strokes and turns with the fan. I have used this score before, on the street together with the lamenting sound of a bagpipe, but never in a formal performance. The sound of the waves rocks and colours the physical actions, as if the whole scene happens on the sea. Sound and action feed each other, but still it is as if something is missing. I choose to use a text from an earlier production expecting it to be changed later for another related to the yet unknown theme.

I still use the nightmare's logic: characters, costumes and situations that mix together.

My "story" begins with an old man. His steps are unsteady, he leans on a stick with a dragon-head. The old man knows and remembers everything: my own life and my characters from earlier productions. He speaks with a hoarse voice from under a big black hat that covers most of his face.

In what for the moment is the last scene, I return to the drowned person. From the tape-recorder Kai sings about a ship and a loved person who has disappeared. The drowned person is a doll made of costume pieces and the parade character's mask. It lies on the floor under a transparent violet cloth. I slowly move the cloth up and down. With some good will, thoughts could be led to water.

I repeat the sequences, one after the other, with only the pauses necessary to press the tape-recorder's on and off buttons. Something is taking form, without any proper text and without the theme being defined.

#### THE THEME

Back at the theatre in Holstebro I show Eugenio (Barba) the chain of sequences. "We must find a theme!" - he says - and proposes *Oedipus in Colon*, a classical play about the old Oedipus reaching the end of his wandering and of his life. I am absolutely not stimulated.

During the summer holidays Kai and I continue to work. We develop the montage placing Kai within it and once again show it to Eugenio, who repeats that also this new assembly leads his thoughts towards *Oedipus in Colon*. Eugenio must have noticed my expression, because after thinking a little, he adds: "But one of the scenes, when you have the bandage in your mouth and move following the accordion music, could also be a memory from your own youth, your travels and your relationship with Eik in the sixties". (Eik was my boyfriend before entering Odin Teatret, he was a beat-singer and poet; he committed suicide in India in 1968.) Suddenly the key lay in our hands, a

space opened up and something resonated in all three of us.

But is it possible - I ask myself - to talk about Eik, drugs, the sixties in a theatre performance? How can it be at all possible to talk of something which is so closely woven into my own person without becoming banal, pathetic, sentimental or much too direct and personal? I am aware of the danger.

As a point of departure we use the already existing scores performed by the characters which belong to my past as an actress: the Shaman - from *Come! and the Day Will Be Ours*; the white character from the street parades; Trickster - a magical creature, somewhere between Harlequin, an ape and a juggler, from the performance *Talabot*; Kattrin - Mother Courage's mute daughter from the performance *Brecht's Ashes*. The characters and their actions are accompanied by music and song. Nothing has much to do with Eik, except the drowned person who could be associated with his death. A person suffocated and foundered by a pressure so violent that it pulls the rudder out of his hands like a force of nature.

Eugenio is nine years older than me and has not been through the same experiences. He would like to know more and he asks me to write about my life with Eik and about that time in the sixties.

#### THE TEXT

*The story must be told, but which story? I have tried many times, and each time I've said to myself: no, even if I don't speak a single untrue word, it is not the right picture of what happened. And then I gave it up with a feeling of impotence towards the words, those words which were so important in my relationship to Eik, which sometimes were the relationship. When I started at Odin Teatret and moved to Holstebro in 1966, it was as if this bridge of words collapsed between us. Eik died ... I was told one New Year's Eve in Saunte. On New*

*Year's Day I walked hand in hand along the beach with Torgeir. It had snowed. The air was white and quiet. Without Eik and without words.*

We are in Stockholm with *Talabot*. I am staying in a big apartment together with Torgeir Wethal (actor at Odin Teatret). There is snow and sleet outside. Every morning I sit at the writing table in the sitting-room. A long letter starts to take form, it is written to Eugenio and Kai - who does not know about that period in my life either.

I write: *It was in the darkness that I met Eik for the first time, during the campaign for nuclear disarmament in 1961. It was night. We had been out to stick up posters. We had both been taken by the police. Eik quacked a lot, but was rather unimpressive. A weed with red hair.*

*We were a small group who met each other on the Holback march - artists, workers, intellectuals, students. What did we believe in during that time when we marched day after day, or when we lay down for twenty-four hours in front of the city hall? We believed that it was meaningful.*

*We were heading towards a new open society. Away with weapons. Forward with fellowship and warmth. The post-war political ice was melting. We were so many and we breathed and breathed on that glacier to help it give birth. And it did give birth - to the flower children, to folk music, to beat music, to new ways of dressing, to new words.*

*Eik and I lived together. We could have up to ten people in our room and bed. We read, talked, listened to Bob Dylan. Eik wrote and wrote. He wrote all the time I knew him: poems, novels, articles, letters.*

*I don't remember any precise reason why the politics faded into the background. Had life in Denmark become too easy for us, with a lot of words and meanings which were no longer rooted in something real? Was it the journeys or the drugs which started to*

*change our way of looking at the world and life?*

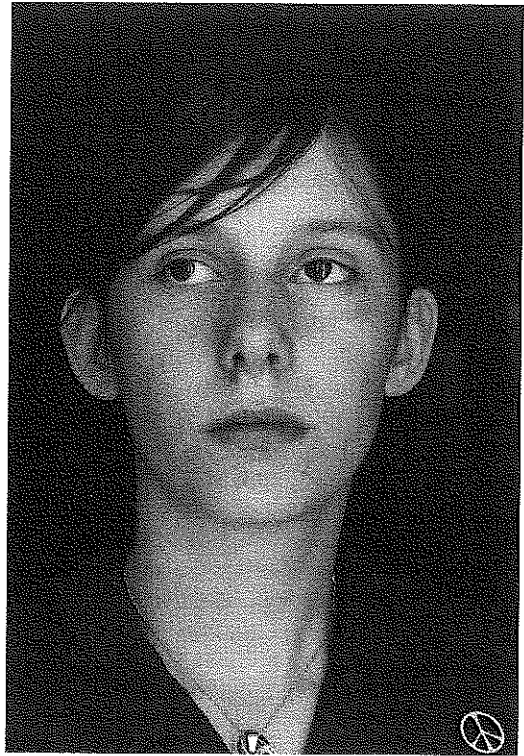
*The journeys placed our lives beyond what was secure. We had never experienced hunger before, never lived without a roof over our heads, frozen in the night, never made our way with a guitar and hat to collect money at the French Riviera, in Italy, in Spain.*

*On board the boat, with a thousand stars above us, Eik pointed into the darkness and said: "Iben Africa! We are away from the tidy, the cold, the calculating, the mediocre. We are away from Denmark". Eik played and I collected the money. Desert ... in the villages, desert ... in the towns, desert ... Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, desert ... The Bedouins offered us goat's milk. Eik received continuous offers concerning my person. The towns were dirty, the museums far too big. We sat in hitch-hiked cars and saw the descending sun colour sky and earth in the same colour. Egypt, Lebanon, Turkey, Greece. I was pregnant. We played in the bars, in the streets, to get money for that terrifying abortion where I saw God's face without love, like a distorted image of myself. The summer was almost gone. I longed for the North - for rain, clouds, wind, snow. "I hate the thought of the coming Autumn in Denmark", said Eik.*

We travel to the north of Sweden, to Umeå. The snow lies half melted in big mounds. It is icy and slippery on the road and pavements. People fall over easily and suddenly, breaking bones and hips. We are taking part in a festival. My hotel room is small, but there is space enough for my typewriter. We have some days off. The others leave in small groups to visit the Swedish landscape, while I have decided to stay in Umeå to write.

I sit down to finish my long letter and in the evening I carefully go out in the dark to listen to Northern singers' and musicians' concerts in churches, theatres or community halls. There is a great distance

from the daily life in Umeå to the world which is slowly reappearing through my words in the hotel room.



Iben Nagel Rasmussen, 1962.  
Photo: Hafdan Rasmussen

*... We lived with the blind rolled down in borrowed apartments. We chewed amphetamines from spoons. We fixed morphine and Dexedrine. The abuse turned us to crime: we broke into the chemist where we also took the money from the cash till. We sat and messed around with our own or someone else's veins to get a shot in. The veins on the arms and the hands were destroyed. Then we changed to the legs or the feet, the most unthinkable places on the body. It could take half an hour to come through the vein - desperate minutes until*

*the blood, like a little thin snake, trickled into the pump and then mixed itself with the liquid in the syringe.*

*When LSD came to Denmark we got hold of some capsules. It was the meeting with a divine world, wonderfully beautiful and sometimes ferocious.*

*Eik was taken by the police again, so was I. This time I got probation.*

*Eik went to Kuwait, Baghdad, Teheran where he begged for money for a typewriter. I went to Istanbul, Athens, Israel ... "If I could talk ... if I could talk ... if I could talk", I said to myself in the mountains in Eilath.*

Through the window I can see the Swedish flag flapping gently against a pale winter sky. The letter is reaching its end, nearly one hundred pages. I am nervous about delivering it.

Back in Denmark I dig out Eik's letters: it occurs to me that they have waited many years just for this moment. I had put them away in a big folder, they fill nearly twice as many pages as those I have written myself.

It is a very big package with texts Eugenio has taken with him in his luggage to his summer house in southern Italy.

### THE REHEARSALS

We have asked Jan, who had composed and played the guitar piece, if he wants to take part in the performance. He has said yes.

Jan belongs to my generation and has been through many of the same experiences. He falls in easily with the sixties' music, both Eik's own songs (that Jan knew from before), the song about Eik for which my brother Tom had composed both music and text (Jan worked with Tom many years ago) and the Doors themes Kai had chosen for the first montage.

*There are dark forces which blind you, and there are dark forces which give you*

*insight. We are led by dark forces - to where? - we don't know.*

(Eugenio Barba's text, used in *Itsi Bitsi*)

When Eugenio shows me the text assembly, first of all I am shocked. Can it be possible? He has not used Eik's letters, nor any of the other poems I had given him. All my lines (monologues) are taken from what I wrote on tour. I had never imagined my writing should be used for anything else but a reference for the story.

The scene with the elastic bandage is put together with the text which tells about my meeting with Eik, about our political activities and travels. It follows the same thread of associations I had working in Vienna. The scene is the same, Kai's music is the same, only the text is different and it fits well. But what about the part with Jan's guitar music? The soft, gentle actions are put together with the description of my experiences with drugs, a nasty and ugly reality in complete contrast with my own associations. But it takes me only a little time to understand that this is exactly how it should be. Only this way, with such a distance between the physical expression and the text, is it possible to speak of such an experience.

My personal history is woven with the characters I have played earlier. I already knew it, but never before had it stood out so clearly: most of my roles - Trickster, the Shaman, the white character - contain an element of the dimension, of the magical expanded consciousness, we searched for with drugs.

*When we got in contact with drugs, we thought that a revolution of the mind was just around the corner. For some the drugs were a game, for others a form of escapism, for others again a way of meeting "God". But without us knowing it, the means became the end. The drugs which should have served as door openers, became*

*door closers. Some were on the wrong side  
when the doors started to shut.*

### THE PERFORMANCE

Trickster sits on the long wooden box with his back to the public. An umbrella is fixed to his back with the shade turned upside down full of paper snow. Through the eyes in his mask I can see his red gloves. The spectators start coming in. My breathing changes. Most of all I fear for the text, what if I should not remember it? What if I get stuck? The light in the room is turned off. Only the white sheet on the floor and part of the wooden box are lit. When Jan has finished his musical monologue I/Trickster must jump in. In this position it is practically impossible to imagine the transformation. The performance is a different experience, like jumping out with a parachute hoping it will open.

Cue. I jump. Trickster turns towards the public: hands, feet, jump on the box, down from the box, the snow flies out of the umbrella when I move. Each hop or turn of the body means the snow falls in a certain way. It must land precisely to cover the whole stage area. Not in lumps, but free (how much time we used to find the right mixture of heavy and light paper). Jan plays and sings, with a low voice now, while Trickster repeats the words of the song.

*Eik came to say farewell,  
We'll meet again some day,  
A journey without its equal  
Begins for me at sunset.*

*Then we said goodbye  
And wished him good luck,  
And stood a time in silence  
While he travelled to another continent.*

...

*They found him one evening  
On the jungle edge where the soil is red.  
In a ragged yellow kaftan  
With nothing else, he was dead.*

*The room became so quiet  
Nobody could speak a word.  
All conversation was stunted  
The snow fell so quiet outside.*  
(from from my brother Tom's song about Eik)

The performance flies. Trickster becomes Iben who says that Eik's story must be told. Iben changes to the Shaman who tells of the dark forces which lead us.

Jan and Kai follow and lead by way of the music, at times they break in to comment or to support. We get to the elastic bandage scene with the text about travelling. I am dry in the mouth. The parade character resurrects without the drum, its white costume hangs loose in front of my own body. It is attached at my neck and hands with elastics like a doll cover. When I move it looks like a strange puppet-on-strings. The mask is just beneath my own face.

I cannot see that the performance flies, I only feel the wind that twists and carries me. At times the wind becomes a storm that throws me around. I am about to capsize, but I don't. I hold on to each little detail in the text and action. I recognise them, perform them and am steered by them. It is the same as during rehearsals and at the same time completely different, the details vibrate in another way.

Close to the end of the performance I have transformed to the mute Katrin from *Brecht's Ashes*. She stands on top of the box, which is placed upright, and cries out her warning to the town of Halle and to the auditorium. With deaf and dumb gestures she hits two pieces of iron against each other. They give a resonating sound, which reminds one of church bells.

The box falls, Katrin says:

*When you make me happy,  
I often think, now I could die,  
Then I would be happy until the end.  
When you then get old and think of me  
I will look just like today,*

*And you will have a sweetheart who is always young.*  
(Bertolt Brecht)

Katrin drops her hands and Iben tells the spectators:

*... Eik died twenty-five years old in India on the border with Pakistan in 1968.*

Jan and Kai start gently playing Bob Dylan's *Blowing in the Wind*. Iben takes Katrin's costume off, she picks up the props and pieces of costume from the floor and puts them back in the box. She puts on a "private" woollen jumper over her black lace dress while I speak to the audience.

*Eik once wrote to me: "One should speak cautiously because words are fragile, crumble between the lips and will express nothing of what we feel and think". But isn't it like that anyway: only words exist, have always existed and will always exist. If Eik could see us now would he be able to recognise the little flame which I try to protect and which speaks in the characters I perform, that which others call theatre?*

I have shut the box. Only the white mask and a hypodermic needle are left on the floor. I speak directly to the mask. No, directly to Eik:

*You walked into the jungle dressed in a yellow loincloth. You carried the poison and your eternal notebooks. You may have sat down to write the letters for us at home. You don't sound sentimental, or dramatic, more like the letters we read together by young men condemned to death by the Germans during the war. You have fallen over in the grass, you must have been in terrible pain. Sky, grass and trees must then have become a wheel which turned around, over and through you ... and you have then heard an old woman sing.*

No tape-recording of water, no drowned person covered by a transparent cloth. No Kai who sings about a loved person who has disappeared. But at the same time it is all there, like an underground current, a deep echo. I do not think of it, I do not *want* it, the current is present in the same way as the wrinkles around my eyes and the lines on my hand.

A long journey has ended and a new one can begin. We are ready to go on tour with the production that is about and *is* my life, at the same time. We call it *Itsi Bitsi*, an affectionate name Eik gave me, and the title of one of his songs. Jan and Kai sing it in the final scene. *Teeny-weeny* - it could also be the play in which everything fits in a box that reveals a microcosm of life, words and characters when it is opened. My own life as a private person, as actor and as a woman.

Translated from Danish by Julia Varley and Nigel Stewart

IBEN NAGEL RASMUSSEN (Denmark), has been an actress and pedagogue at Odin Teatret since 1966. She has appeared in both collective and solo performances and her experiences with Odin Teatret are published in *The Actor's Way*, edited by Erik Exe Christoffersen. She leads Farfa, a group of actors and directors from different countries particularly interested in the actor's training. Editor of the book *Breve til en veninde* (Letters to a friend) by Eik Skaløe.



Iben Nagel Rasmussen, Jan Ferslev, Kai Bredholt in *Itsi Bitsi*. Photo: Fiora Bemporad