

Rabab Ghazoul

Journeys Around a Word

How to begin. Always a dilemma. Too many thoughts on what the possibilities could be. And this is a big word - *politics*. And then there is being a woman, and theatre to deal with too. *Theatre, Women, Politics*, a big title. So I have a big title and I have some smaller ones too. Little journeys of the page, frustrated offerings trying to condense themselves into paragraphs of clarity and coherence. Seven words/phrases are in my mind, that I can find inside *politics*, as they come to me today, running something like this: DEMOCRACY; PERCEPTION; MY FATHER'S COUNTRY; VALUE OVER TRUTH; CRITICAL THEORY MAKES YOU DREARY; HAPPINESS, JOY; THE ORDINARY VISIONARY.

DEMOCRACY: From Mid-Wales to Minny Street

We will make a show together and we will all be equal. And no-one will boss anyone around, and it will be nice and respectful and the show will come from all of us, not one imposing vision bearing down upon the rest. Hey, we won't even have a director, because we'll all direct and participate in the whole process. And we'll share all the administration too. Everything will be equal and fair, the same cut of pie for each member of Alma Theatre. Because as a female theatre company we should be trying to provide radical alternatives to hierarchical working structures, to unnecessary demarcations of roles and responsibilities. We will share everything. And it will be fair. And it will be equal. And this will be a model for living.

Four years ago - 1993 - *Political Visions of a Naif*. It all soon crumbles, soon the realer world is upon us. We decide to appoint a director amongst us and just make a piece of theatre instead of figuring out the most politically correct agenda for artistic collaboration. Lessons are soon learnt - about the difficulty of practising principles, and the

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complications and personal intricacies that nestle deep in the grooves of idealism. We learn that you cannot start with words, but must begin with a will to make/act/work together and discover whilst making/acting/working how to fit idealism alongside reality.

For now, democracy falls by the wayside. Only in the sense that we wake up a little. It is our first rude awakening. Later, we try again and by now we know it's impossible for us all to be sharing everything all the time - directing, acting, administration - so we change to another structure: shift work. "I do the boring bit for a while, while you do the interesting bit, then we swap." This still goes on, and in 1997 the structure is still finding itself. Persistence is necessary for any vision to realise itself.

**PERCEPTION:
I've got my mind set on you**

*I've got my mind set on you
I've got my mind se-ee-ee-t on-u-you
But it's gonna take tiiiiiiii-ime,
A whole lotta precious time,
It's gonna take patience and tiii-yum
Oooohhhooohhhh to get it,
to get it, to get it, to get it, to get it
to get it right child ...*

Setting my mind on something and not shifting or swaying from this vision. My needing to adopt this attitude to theatre. It is the same with politics, or certainly what's needed in politics - grand, long term visions of the world based on world peace, respect, love, and freedom and happiness ... no sarcasm, no irony, I am perfectly serious. This is the demand that change makes of us - that we are able to consistently conceive of it, believe in it, in our minds first. I'd say that much of the work I do in theatre is about changing my perception of myself in it. Not

so much defining what kind of theatre I want to make, but what kind of person I would like to be in the process of making it. How do I wish to behave/act/achieve/live within this realm I have chosen - theatre.

Perception and our will to change is the seed of the political act, indeed it is our most immediate political tool. The nature of our perception is, it goes without saying, critical to all our lived experiences. So, it is as important for me to train my perception as it is to train my body in the space or train myself to write funding applications. I think for me this is my first point of political departure.

Training in Italy recently, we would all hit blocks again and again and would look for the solution somewhere in the words of our teachers. Their words consistently led us back to ourselves, to our perception of the "block" and our need to change our attitude towards it. This is where we find empowerment and freedom. To be free is knowing you can choose to feel differently about any given situation. In theatre, of course I have a vision of the work I would like to be making, but closely following this comes the necessary change in my perception required for me to believe it can be realised. This is a kind of political work.

**MY FATHER'S COUNTRY - AND MINE:
Taff, Thames and Tigris**

I am thinking of my father and his country, which I often call mine. I am thinking of all the ways in which one might use the word "political". I am thinking of my father, and Iraq, and my feelings for a country that rests in my memory like antique photographs. Like antique photographs because in life, but not in memory, my father's country, and the country I often call mine, is no longer what it was when I left it over seventeen years ago.

I am twenty-seven. I was born in Mosul,

northern Iraq. From the age of about nine or ten I lived in England. My father is an Arab, my mother a mixture of American, Armenian and Arabic. She is not as confused as I am, though perhaps she has more cause. I'm a real "Muslawia" - a regional description for someone who not only speaks with a strong Mosul accent, but is also typically Mosul in "type" - so I was told as I grew up. I love this, despite my politically-correct inclinations to question any references to "type", type being merely a hop and a skip away from stereotype. But I care little in this instance for my contradictions. I hang on to being "Muslawia" for dear life.

So I'm Muslawia when I'm speaking the Arabic I can remember and I speak with an English accent when I'm speaking English and I live and work in Wales but do not yet speak Welsh and feel I should for both the wrong and right reasons. And I could say that this all puts me somewhere seemingly specific but actually not specific at all, actually quite vague and unparticular, somewhere in between a lot of things, but firmly fixed nowhere.

The hybrid is as strong an identity in the late twentieth century as that of the individual who can lay claim to a place called home or a thing called nationality. And yet how I feel about Iraq, and the West's (in economic terms - the US's) self-appointment to the role of global police force is remarkably strong, angry, outraged. This, I suppose, represents the politics that is about talking angrily and determinedly and breaking down preconceptions to events and people and leaders and governments.

It is the politics that is some attempt to equip myself with facts about a country I have not lived in for eighteen years and yearn but hesitate to call my own; it is the politics of attempting to understand how I hail from a country which has, since I left it, been bombed into the stone-age, leaving

its population starving, sick, cancerous (millions of shells of depleted uranium - classed as nuclear waste in the West and disposed of accordingly at great cost - were showered down on Iraqi soil, contaminating the water table for tens of thousands of years to come, causing cancer rates to soar and babies to be born with deformities that make me shudder); a country I have not seen for eighteen years and am unsure how to address, confront, assimilate into a personal history that now spans England and Wales, new languages, new issues, themes and aspirations; new homes and new years; and theatre and being female. And *Theatre, Women, Politics* is also about that perhaps. No clear cut answers. No tidy definitions. Making theatre, being female and asking questions about the political is also about finding how these things link up. How Iraq links up with Wales, how Arabic connects with Cymraeg, how an English accent fits around being Muslawia. I want to learn how to make good theatre. In order to be confident to tackle the impossible.

VALUE OVER TRUTH:

Learning from Makiguchi

Clarity about politics is hard. Clarity about anything relating to ourselves, our feelings and passions and principles is difficult to convey in its fullness. I have said so little, and missed out so much. Of myself. Which is inevitable. But contained inside this slipperiness of self is a kind of empowerment. We think empowerment is about defining or redefining what we are, as women, as theatre makers. I think it is also about not needing to convey the fullness of what we are. Knowing we are full, and not minding what comes across in the moment.

In daily life this is the empowerment of the individual - when we are able to be at ease with the gaps in other people's perceptions of us. I am forever qualifying every-

thing I say in case I do not give the whole picture of myself. How terrible that someone might think I am something I am not, or think I am not something which I know myself to be. We could get stuck in words forever, and never *do* anything (see "critical theory makes you dreary").

In a world increasingly articulated through ever changing discourses, theories and fast moving technologies, how is identity to remain fixed and "true"? Politically, I would like to dispense with the truth. Not because it is not important but because it is unreliable. It is becoming harder and harder to discern truly what is happening on the planet because we are confronted daily with the deadly and impenetrable precision of vast public relations outfits masquerading as our governments. How then to get to the truth when the very systems supposedly safeguarding it are working round the clock to provide us with distorted versions of the very truth we are searching? The truth is not a good yardstick with which to judge life.

In the 1940s a Japanese man called Tsunesaburo Makiguchi posited the principle of value over truth. A simple example: the sun rises every morning. We can say this is a truth. But what of this truth, and where exactly does this knowledge get me? He talked, in his philosophies, spanning politics, education, culture about measuring something not according to whether it were true or not, but according to the value of that truth manifested in the world.

I suppose this is what I wish to learn in theatre - how to create something that has value. Value for others, but which is not prescribed. In theatre it is not a matter of ensuring that our audience receives one version of the truth. The truth is many things to many people. We are trying to ensure rather that they receive something which is of value. To them. We cannot create this with ideas alone - ideas, after all, are easy. I

have many of them driving down the M4, but few of them become theatre pieces. It is rather the commitment to taking action based on an idea that creates value. Politically we are also in need of this commitment. Not to the idea, only. But to its realisation through actions.

CRITICAL THEORY MAKES YOU DREARY:

The worth of the word

I'm joking but I'm also serious. There are too many "isms" and too many discourses and too many overlapping theories. Has postmodernism made things extra complicated or was it always like this? Sometimes I feel like I'm living in a world that defines itself in ways that are totally alien to me. I have difficulty in grasping the "isms" - even feminism, it changes so much and so often that it is difficult to keep up with the latest post-post-whatever-was-the-last-twist-or-turn-in-definition. At the same time we are inextricably part of, reflecting, bound by and a product of our culture, and I am as familiar as I can be with the discourses through just existing and living in civilised, so called, society, as opposed to in a hut out in the sticks though increasingly the information superhighway knows no bounds, nor territory harsh nor uninhabitable, or so the advertising moguls would lead us to believe. I must sound like an old die-hard and this is not my intention because that is not where progress, I believe, lies, and yet ... I cannot relate to so many concepts of the world that take for granted a certain understanding, nay immersion, in their historical, cultural and political evolution.

I don't pretend to know what is meant by the "isms" - by the marxism, or the socialism, the poststructuralism, the marxist feminism. I can read about them and imagine them, and I have a notion of them as economic structures and political and cultural theories but not as tangible ways of

living in the world.

My most difficult political encounters have been with those with whom I work. Not because we have gone into rehearsals armed with tear gas or a copy of *Post-Modernism and the Consumer Society*, but purely because to continue working together requires that I sometimes change myself in ways beyond what I deem myself capable of. I suppose, however, I also feel a pressure, a duty almost, to be up to date with the theories that contemporary academic thinking generates. Perhaps because I sense what it is to come out of a tradition of the oppression of the female intellect or rather the suppression of its visibility. But I'm tired and feel the need to move on from this - as a woman and a human. This is why critical theory makes me dreary, because somewhere along the line it provides a diversion from action. For me.

HAPPINESS, FULFILMENT : **A different drive**

As a theatre director I am trying to make work with others in an environment whereby creativity on a human and artistic level is the ruling factor. There's also a feeling in how I work of wanting to challenge some myths and givens about artistic endeavour: the image of the "suffering artist"; the supposition that pain is the essence of the creative drive; the hopelessness of the human condition as the inspiration for art.

The pursuit of happiness for ourselves and others is the highest political agenda I can think of fighting for. A 13th century Buddhist monk described happiness not as the absence of suffering but as the absolute confidence that it can be overcome. Dynamism. In this sense, for me well-being, fulfilment and joy are pretty important as drives to overcoming injustice, pain and oppression.

THE ORDINARY VISIONARY: **Revolution in microcosm**

Politics is a big word. But it is also a tiny word, like all words. They are small and sit neatly on pages, or melt into the air that hovers just above and beneath the lips.

I recently learnt something of what it is to work and work and work in theatre, and to show only one hundredth, if that, of one's work. The presentation of the hundredth contains invisibly the rest of the ninety-nine percent, in the form of the possibilities that you didn't choose. It's the same as with life. Figuring out the possibilities through trial and terror. Yes, terror. There is nothing more frightening than change. But it is also simple, I have to keep reminding myself. It is just to stay with the same thing and try and try to make it work just where one happens to be. That is the starting point. Because anywhere can be the beginning for the answers to everything. Anywhere and anytime is where the world can be changing.

I would like to think of a politics that is active and yet ordinary, as mundane and yet as necessary as food. Nourishing growth, changing the body and the mind and life around one. Something to live by. To change by. Be happy by. To include daily.

RABAB GHAZOUL (Britain) was born in Iraq. The frustrations of a three-year drama degree led her to co-found Cardiff based Alma Theatre in 1993. The company saw its beginnings at the time of the Magdalena Project's *Raw Visions* in 1993 and since then has been producing original devised work in Wales and beyond. Rabab works as a director, actor and administrator.