

Francesca Mazza

An Opened Door

It feels stuffy in Italian theatres. When I say “stuffy” I am not only referring to the old-fashioned and stale atmosphere emanating from so many stages of the so-called domestic tradition. I am also thinking of all those defensive barriers built around newly conquered spaces containing well and badly received realities; I am thinking of a strictly limited world which has no external reference. At a certain point in my acting career - for personal reasons - I left the niche to which I had been assigned, where artistic continuity, economic stability and protection were ensured (in the shade of a large tree). I slammed the door behind me and, instead of the freedom that I had been dreaming of, I found thousands of other doors. The only freedom I found was that of choosing a door and deciding whether to knock on it or not. So ... I constructed my own door - the key of which I own - and I opened it to women.

Last season, I was appointed by the Authorities for Equal Opportunities of the Bologna Province and Town Council of Imola to organise two theatre workshops exclusively reserved for women who had shared the *Retravailler* experience. The *Retravailler* method (developed in France in the '70s by the sociologist Evelyne Sullerot and imported into Italy in the '80s) is devoted to adult women (twenty-five to fifty-five years old) who, having left their jobs for various reasons (child raising, loss of employment, etc.), intend to resume working. It is a sort of professional re-training which - besides providing practical information about laws and regulations, how to get ready for job interviews or how to read an employment contract - aims at “de-rusting” women’s behaviour and mentality. Above all, it aims at turning into resources some components in women’s curricula which are normally viewed as obstacles. *Retravailler* focuses on an extremely complex and varied feminine universe.

Many women live in a state of economic - and therefore social and psychological - emergency; others are looking for

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incentives to escape from frustrating situations; many others are just feeling lonely. Often they are no longer young, and in this case the number of difficulties increases. In all of them there is a need to test their own energy, influence the social context in which they live and establish constructive relationships. The mere awareness of being alive cannot satisfy people. The proposal which came from the Local Government Authorities aimed at supporting such tendencies, at favouring - through theatre - the personal growth which started with the *Retravailler* courses.

In my profession I have often felt the need to confront reality directly, immersing myself in exotic and diverse experiences and changes that widen one's horizon and understanding, as well as one's ability to share profoundly.

The idea of working with an homogeneous group had intrigued me for a long time; in fact I had been thinking of a factory environment. I found myself in a group which was hybrid in terms of age and economic and cultural conditions, but which somehow had a cohesion from the *Retravailler* experience, which every group member had lived through with a great deal of involvement and satisfaction. My work covered a highly significant cross-section of society: twenty-six women between twenty-three and fifty-nine years of age, coming from different social, cultural and geographical backgrounds.

They were average middle-class women with no great expectations, and yet, curious, generous and full of wisdom. I worked with them for four months, months which I think are going to have a permanent effect on our lives. And together we made our own living theatre: a theatre which was a shelter, an outpost and a compression chamber, but which also imposed an artistic transformation (it would not be theatre if it didn't) on

our everyday lives.

The main raw material of our work was drawn from our everyday lives, then projected outwards and objectified to make a clear delineation between self-expression and mere gossip-confession, between the pathetic and the morbid, so frequently encountered in television talk shows. At first I was the one who spoke, since I had to explain and enquire. What a disappointment for those who expected to be assigned roles or to see the set and the costumes!

"Try to forget logic - I would say - try to go beyond conditioned responses, remove everything that is encrusted upon us and contaminates us. Discard the first thing that comes to mind. Avoid banality and surrender to unusual associations. Think abstractly, using your senses. And talk about yourselves." As time went by, I talked less and less.

The theatre space was gradually opened up and then occupied. Once shyness was overcome and a plan of co-operation established, words began to flow like a river. I thought I was offering them a place where they could *communicate* and I discovered I had given them a place where they could *be listened to*. Possibly the difference between these two terms is not entirely clear but I think it can be perceived.

The first topics to be touched upon were personal. This may seem obvious as there was no aesthetic concern. To reach the recognition and control of the *artistry* of total body communication (gesture, words, facial expressions, emotions) takes time; often even professional actors are not fully aware of it. When the participants in the group were urged to represent themselves "artistically", they almost always used the written word (often their own). The latter seems to be more important: it is not spontaneous, it requires time to be formulated, it is a product that requires considerable

thought. However, it should be remembered that literature, like painting, although a profound expression, is a means, a projection while the stage requires your body, your face, your voice. The crudity of such exposure (exhibitionism is a good spur, but not a good support) is attenuated by theatrical convention. Theatre is the reproduction of the world in real time, a simulation of life and awareness and self determination of one's own role. Theatre should be a space devoted to measuring ourselves in relation to the world. And this practice could be transferred into real life making theatre into strategy.

I told the women in the group to imagine emptiness, not as absence but as unlimited potential. They should project themselves into this *emptiness* - which should gradually be filled with essential "objects" without frills - with enough courage and honesty to select what really mattered for them, their priorities. Life is undoubtedly not an empty space but it can be "organised". Art is alchemy: therefore *Nothing is created and nothing destroyed, everything is transformed* was the title I chose for our first workshop and *Gardens* was the title of the performance that eventually resulted from the workshop.

Gardens: spaces filled with shapes, colours and scents to be invented at our own pleasure, to be cultivated in order to witness their growth and bloom, spaces for us to observe with full confidence in the recurring spring miracle, spaces which do not exclude the cruelty and necessity of natural selection.

Since we worked in a public and institutional context, at the beginning we had a definite political orientation in the less obvious sense that our way of looking and paying attention to reality was political, once we accepted the urge to be active and participate, to respect and demand respect for our work, even if this was not "materially" productive.

Art work - theatre in particular - is based on traces, it makes shadows real, it devotes itself to "useless" matters like singing, keeping time or digging into memory in order to trace its most remote impressions: *Of traces and shadows and other "useless" things* was the title of our second workshop, which later led to *Lesetadam* (a malicious Italian phonetic spelling of *Les états d'âme*), a performance about emotional travel.

The performance phase - a synthesis of our entire experience - was obviously the strongest and most immediate link with theatre and it posed the problem of discipline in art. Expressive freedom must be guided by well defined rules. Our solitude must be co-ordinated with that of others. The question is not how to adapt ourselves to a given model, but rather to create - and refer to - a new one. The absence of models increasingly imposes the need to recognise the limits of one's freedom. Transgressing rules implies above all having a good knowledge of them and then being able to create new ones. Our experience was fertile and happy; I recovered the purest sense of theatre practice, which has become so watered down - if not completely absent - on the modern theatre scene. I did not put on stage anomalies, social uneasiness or marginality. I did not train actresses: I brought theatre as a living and burning experience among "ordinary" people.

A final consideration tinted with bitterness: I am fully aware that this experience in some cases caused frustration. Theatre is indeed a disease. But theatre is soon over, and the more years go by, the more I realise that this is, above all, its great lesson. There is a time between the raising and lowering of the curtain on the stage which must be seized, exploited and cultivated, with no illusion of eternity.

At the end of *Gardens*, the backdrop

went down and some lights appeared in the dark; fuzzy at first, then more and more clear: ten bicycle lights. My actresses were pedalling, calling one another by name and laughing. The most immediate reference was to those women who, up to some twenty or thirty years ago, had all biked to work together, telling each other the petty things of their lives, sharing both their road and their destiny. They talked aloud and intensely. It is true: we women do talk a lot! And we like it. Sometimes we stand at the door or in the street; sometimes we are going home and it is cold and, maybe, we are carrying heavy bags; or maybe we still have to do our shopping and a lot of other things; yet, we cannot separate, we cannot interrupt our conversation. It may not be centred on important - either basic or painful - topics: it might be just for the pleasure of staying together, of exchanging small secrets, of giving each other some time which belongs exclusively to us and is "useless". I wish this image remained in our memory: some women joyfully, tenaciously pedalling, pointing ahead.

At the end of *Lesetadam*, my actresses came onto the stage carrying old suitcases, out of which they slowly and silently took some simple everyday objects: dresses, books, pictures, a mirror, a telephone, a rosemary plant - an object that each of them had chosen to represent something important.

They showed these objects to the public and left empty-handed, giving up these strong, secret ties, while a child's voice - the daughter of one of them - reminded us that there exists a "theatre under the sky, where everybody comes in, says their lines and disappears".

Translated from Italian by Tito Saronne

FRANCESCA MAZZA (Italy) was born in Cremona in 1958. She has a degree in Literature and Philosophy from the University of the Arts Music and Performance in Bologna (DAMS). She also attended theatre school there. Since 1983 she has played in the works of Leo de Berardini, first with Cooperativa Nuova Scena in Bologna and then as a founder member of Teatro di Leo. In addition to her work as an actress she has developed a theatre laboratory and has considerable experience as a director.