

## Maria Ficara - Adelaide C. de Oliveira

# Filling an Empty Theatre - Panacéia

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### Maria Ficara

## Filling an Empty Theatre

I was born in the south-eastern part of Sicily and as a child I used to think that every small town by the sea had, hidden somewhere, a theatre like "mine". It was all carved in soft white stone, ancient and bright, like a bowl lying lazily in the tropical sun, waiting to be filled with people. When I was a little older, I found out it was one of the biggest and best preserved Greek theatres left in the world, the vestige of the powerful city of tyrants, at the time of the *Magna Graecia*. As a teenager, I used to sit there for whole days, together with my friend Lucia. We were the only visitors during spring and autumn, when the old caretaker would let us in, without asking about our school timetable.

I cannot recall the thousand reasons I had to sit there. One was a sensation I perceived more and more strongly: the place created for visions, dreams, raptures and stories was always empty. On the hill considered sacred, ancient society had placed the theatre detached from itself geographically and so it had remained. The noisy life all around and the rare presence of somebody only driven there by a valid reason made me think that the same emptiness and silence of that perimeter could exist only in cemeteries or in rubbish dumps. Sacred or useless: a place where there is something of your own that has to remain there, so as not to contaminate life.

My time in that theatre is a private memory: a personal relation with an exceptional physical place, an "other" place, where the daily suffocation, the normal noise of indifference and prevarication, of discomfort and unconsciousness has no place. I remember silence among the only inhabitants of that place, the ghosts that time has encrusted, together with the echo of words not yet uttered.

For me, words have become writing, a pretext behind which it is possible to hide the restless search for experiences and for "other", even anonymous places, where you can find something belonging to you, and people to share it with.

Generations build themselves on affinity, often gathering around the choice of a master, or for a dumb and stinging necessity which reveals itself only in part, only occasionally.

Generation: this word reminds me of a man, whose books filled the shelves of my library at home when I was an adolescent. He was a writer, playwright, journalist. His words narrated to me what I see on my island, the same dance of opposites that characterises those born in Sicily. He described the essential and baroque we Sicilians are made of and the numberless faces this combination gives life to. Realistic or dreamy, written for actors or puppets, his theatre was the first, clear voice to reach me, and it was as if it came from the theatre on the hill.

For his sharp and prophetic investigations on the connections between business and criminality which he continually reported in his independent newspaper, he was killed one winter night. He died outside an important theatre in a town close to mine. Perhaps he could not have chosen to stop anywhere else, but just beside the theatre and far from the stage.

I was twenty-five years old when I set foot into the editorial office of the newspaper he had founded. I was one of the so-called "third generation": young boys and girls from all over, come to frequent that place about ten years after the director's death. We were united by the same will to look beneath the surface of things, in order to understand events in a difficult country. We tried to do so without prejudice and with a critical eye which perhaps made us different. I found no masters there. I was not looking for them. I only found the painful absence of someone who, with a unique and special skill had generated an important experience and had left as orphans those who shared his ideals. Those still living had

to go on doing the work. They had to ask themselves about that which perhaps cannot be taught, but that is the only thing which prevents experiences from being buried: autonomy.

To pick up the heritage of someone we choose as our master means not to allow it to die, by searching for the sense it contains, both for us and them. Maybe we do so by distancing ourselves so as to then stumble across its renewed presence, re-encountered some day by chance.

Maybe it was also this experience at the newspaper that made me join up with theatre people some time later. I followed the pretext of an interest which did not hide itself anymore behind episodic commitments. What I did not have, or had not found, led me towards full-time work with theatre. Perhaps, it was the possibility I indistinctly saw of exploring myself in a different kind of writing that could grow through the actors. I would no longer conclude its form on the sheet of paper; I would no longer decide its destination beforehand. At the same time, I was attracted by the illusion of participating in the living mechanisms of the theatre I had studied alone for so long, in order to discover its authentic history, one which is not only nourished by the stage. Above all, it was once more the search for a shared experience from which I could learn that brought me to meet theatre people.

Five years ago, in 1995, during a theatre workshop in southern Italy, actors, directors, half-groups and lonely artists proposed the formation of a network, with the desire of exploring a common path. The idea was born from a name: Linea Trasversale (transversal line), which directly touched all those who, like me, deeply believe that "generations" are created dynamically through the crossing of indirect and tortuous roads. Scattered and uneven leaps suddenly break down the isolation of our lives and allow us

to meet those who also have a history of solitude. This common solitude which was born and grew in the most far off places but in similar ways, and was defended, disrespectful of all systems in the shadow of a silent barricade, becomes the meeting point that builds a generation.

Linea Trasversale is a network of theatre people who live on the margins of consolidated circuits, and because it is not a group already it is possible to belong to it. An experience that maybe nobody has handed down voluntarily, but that is growing day after day, has the opportunity to survive there. Nobody calls himself or herself "master", yet all the people who have taken part in Linea's birth and all those who make up its components now, transmit a specific knowledge. In Linea I see the elements of alchemy, based on each person's contribution to safeguarding his or her own diversity, ghosts, emptiness, that they only accidentally call "theatre".

I see pieces of a "generation" assembling together around this common necessity. It is a generation living in the total absence of communication, beside saturated social roles, which lay waste to dialogues and relationships. To work together with theatre people so different from each other, is for me the discovery of a tribe with an empty theatre on the hill in common. With them I join a community that takes the form of a desert caravan, sharing the travelling so as to make an impossible journey possible, by putting together our solitudes for protection.

Linea Trasversale is itinerant, because it has no fixed abode. Performances, workshops and artistic exchanges were born of our many meetings as well as theatrical solidarity campaigns to help religious missionaries carry out interventionist projects to



Homeless children following a parade in Brasil.  
Photo: Fabio Butera

help socially marginalised people find autonomy and self-sufficiency.

The search for autonomy strategies at the margins, a search that we called *Ethics and Survival*, has led Linea to spend some time among the anonymous workers in Brazil. The motivation behind this journey is no different from that which supports the daily contact some of us have with minority groups - those abandoned in infancy and distressed people - through our theatre activities.

Marginalised people are also seeking to survive, and they have much to teach us about the personal disciplines and strategies used to achieve this difficult search. To exchange these strategies is useful for us to advance within the context in which we live, to make it a place for us and for others. While we learn, we are all asked to transmit

our experience. We teach what we have most sought, in anonymity, beside somebody else's lesson, while we were looking for our own direction. So we meet other people in the field where choices are made, while trying to protect what each of us is. We learn from others how to dialogue with ourselves.

During these years Linea Trasversale has met and "hosted" other networks and a great number of people in many countries; but maybe some of our experience will survive in the future of a homeless child, who smiled at us, and in her belonging to a future generation.

MARIA FICARA (Italy) was born in Sicily in 1969, graduated in Foreign Languages and Literature, and undertook post-graduate studies in theatre. She is a translator and theatre scholar. Since Linea Trasversale was born in 1995, she has co-organised the thirteen meetings in Italy and abroad. She presently works with Teatro Proskenion as a dramaturg and assistant director in Scilla, Southern Italy, where, together with Claudio La Camera, she has also organised the last four sessions of the University of Eurasian Theatre.

## Adelaide C. de Oliveira Panacéia

### DESTINY OF SHADOWS

You know those moments when life is on the border between falling apart or coming together? A word, a gesture - no matter how small - made by anybody would be enough for either one thing or the other to happen. It was at such a time that the northern winds brought an unexpected invitation: leave home.

The invitation came from foreigners, a group of Italian actor-travellers, whose first aim seemed to be to confuse. The first contact happened when they came to Brazil, during the journey that they called *Ethos and Survival - On the way to Ayacucho - IX Meeting of Linea Trasversale*. Created by Claudio La Camera, Linea Trasversale's main aim is to gather scholars, directors and actors together for periodic meetings of theatre research favouring exchanges at a cultural, artistic and social level. Pedro Leopoldo, a

dormitory town near the capital of the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais (fertile in gold and diamonds in the era of Portuguese colonisation), was chosen to welcome these Europeans and other artists from Argentina, Mexico and Brazil to present for us Linea Trasversale. It was the knot that still needed to be tied.

The crossroad was free, a horizon opened, and with wretched luggage I left. I already knew I would go back, that I wished to return, because I was aware I was making a journey around myself. I arrived in an unknown land, feeling talkative. The prospects were confused.

For six months I wandered around Italy, France, Spain and Britain in search of a theatre identity with which I could connect. I came across fragmented directionless movements and people who worried about

how much they would earn from their next "artistic" production.

The presence of those I call my "parents", the members of Teatro Proskenion, one of the groups related to Linea Trasversale, filled my dreams with discoveries of new possibilities.

The first meeting with my "parents" took place on another occasion in Scilla, Italy, at the seminar *Writing and Narrating Theatre*, during the VI session of the University of Eurasian Theatre.

*Pavimento* (the Italian word for floor) was a word - amongst many others used by Nicola Savarese in a lecture about the strategies of safety of the samurai - that marked the discovery that I could overcome the language barrier. It seems strange that this morphology, with such a hard and base meaning in my own tongue, should be the starting point for awakening the body to action. But what is a floor? It is the base on which we walk. But I could see myself walking on clouds.

At the end of a journey that allowed me to see the thousand year old forms and beautiful artistic architecture of the old continent, I was back in Brazil, to find my own *chão* (floor in Brazilian). It seemed as though I had just woken up from a long sleep; no shock, just longing. But not the recognisable longing for known signs, friends and family, but for something that was about to emerge, that until then had maintained itself hidden, or right on the limit of making itself visible.

### **I CONTINUED TO LOOK AROUND ME**

There was a need for a collective and this inspired *Panacéia*, a meeting of young theatre practitioners based in Brazil. We wanted to rid ourselves of the problems of not having an identity. The social environment around us was visibly alive, like a condensed, amorphous and transparent mass. Our link with this effervescence was its artistic content. I was summoned to

confront this situation. In the attempt to get closer to something more European many of us who had participated in *Panacéia - XII Meeting of Linea Trasversale* tried to disentangle ourselves from the idea. The event had taken place in April 1999. Its title was ...among individuals, groups and communities...

We developed a kind of manifesto:

*Mabaré, an Indian of the Japexê tribe, attributed life to an invisible seed, sprouted from the first bush: dissemination. He wore nothing other than the colours of his tanned skin and the urucu battle paint of his own belly button. One day, while hunting prey, he encountered his own reflection. He was frightened. He ran. He hid and took aim. He did not even notice that the other person had the same impulses and made the same movements.*

Little by little both the social and artistic out-casts took to the idea of joining in order to show the commitment each had to preserving the culture which they desired and the environment in which they live, since both are the victims of human beings. From that point on we had theatre made by prostitutes (presented in a church straight after the Sunday Mass); by the street-cleaners of Belo Horizonte (the capital of Minas Gerais); by street children from a small nearby town; and by youngsters on the edge between survival (off-stage) and a newly found freedom (on-stage). The image of a young abandoned foreigner who finds a welcome in the arms of an innocent virgin still remains with me. The daring thing (or the reality) was to get underneath the illusory stage of life, where the sacred and the profane get dirty, while sanctifying themselves.

### **GETTING UNTIED**

For years I have sought the answer to the

question: who am I within theatre and what is the theatre within me? It is an almost Socratic question, the same as trying to find out "who am I" and "what do I do".

Theatre is alive, but its soul is not made of life; to survive in the complicity, in the passage between the imaginary and the real, in faking when you want to say the truth, in the integrity of the presence of what seems to be. Therefore, each experience is always new and vigorous, even pretence itself. The untruthfulness of theatre is implicit in its very existence. This opposition allows it to survive, just as it makes me see and believe in things even before they happen. I say this because I believe my generation is living through a crisis from the lack of development of theories, texts, and aims: they have been the same for years! So, what kind of performance has theatre staged? The shows we can call traditional, with a predominance of farces? Or the experimental pieces that no longer make much sense, except to a group of "alienated" people with possibilities of creation?

On the other hand, humans in general -and of course I include myself - have a strange obsession with deceiving themselves with their own meta-linguistic games, with the small triumphs of genius that they manage to achieve, turning these into the parameters of their existence. It is probably for this reason that I am talking about the birth of Panacéia right now. But what guarantees the survival of Panacéia? The collective environment that inspired it? Am I falling into a Marxist illusion by thinking this?!

All of a sudden, I realise that the world is stronger than I am. An internal process of neutralisation begins entering that huge corridor where alternative possibilities expand, in a horizon full of new assumptions. The search grows and continues, because we belong to a culture (our way of being) that

has not yet been found.

The route follows what is unexpected, it goes into darkness, but still its direction is clear. It is necessary to open the cupboard doors and let that which is hidden flower. This is the reason why we are preparing a new Panacéia, this branch of Linea Trasversale - a road in a permanent state of disrepair. We will take the opportunity to ask ourselves up to what point the role of the actor changes in relation to the transformations of the stage.

In the same place where the seed was sown, in the city of Pedro Leopoldo, we are fated to hide ourselves away from the metropolis and expose ourselves to the motions of a landscape without sea. It is a space where the most pure can reveal herself to be adulterous, for she is saved from the desire that rots within her.

Translated from Brazilian by Leo Sykes

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# MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS

*In the following articles and interviews, it's interesting to hear the voice of the mother and the daughter simultaneously. Theatre seems to facilitate the communication and contact between different generations. Daughters born in a family who is dedicated to theatre choose to participate or not, to take distance in search of autonomy, and sometimes return. One daughter decides to join the family tradition, even if her parents wish her a more comfortable and secure life. The daughters have learned to see themselves through their own eyes, through their parents' eyes, and through the eyes of the spectators.*