

Julia Varley

Questions of Time

TIME IS A MILLENNIUM

In Bali a lot of time is dedicated to beauty. The decorations in the streets and homes, in markets and temples are rich and colourful. Nature helps with an abundance of water and flowers. Agriculture helps with the terraced rice fields. In Bali women especially take hours every day to fulfil their duties towards the family shrine and the village temple. All offerings have to be handmade and all food for the ceremonies must be prepared and cooked at home. They dress in ceremonial costumes and walk for miles carrying trays with offerings on their heads. They learn to dance, sing and play music as a form of prayer. Each time I visit Bali I ask myself how women there can have so much time to comply daily with their tradition. In Europe, where eight hours are spent at work or in school, only very few widows and great-grandmothers of the south will attend church services every morning, or nuns, who have chosen prayer as their profession. Time - with communication getting faster and wider every minute and with past experience getting longer and longer - seems to be what I miss most. Time passes and I run after it. Only when I travelled in Thailand and India did I feel free from the time-is-money rule that seems to guide our existence in modern countries.

Unemployment is also a modern trend as technology reduces the need for human power. I was just as impressed as I was in Bali when a man from IBM told me about the problems of modern management today. He explained that in order for workers to produce well, firms need to give them a purpose in life by filling their increasing free time with meaningful activities. Society needs to justify existence for all those who could survive thanks to the work of just a few. Keeping in mind Japanese teenagers that talk with machines and children who play with virtual pets, I conclude that theatre still has a role in the next millennium, a more important role than today.

I belong to the generation that saw theatre as entertainment or as an art form to which practitioners gave a political, ethical or social meaning. The generation of the next millennium might see theatre as a secular ritual that can bring sense,

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discipline, activity and social contact into their lives.

TIME IS ME

I was born in 1954. The changes of 1968 are part of my personal history. When I was seventeen and I started working with political theatre, I knew everything. I was part of those who made theatre as a way to continue political activity, but using a more personal language of actions. I knew what I wanted, with and for whom, and why. I also thought I knew how to achieve what I wanted. And although everything was urgent and could not wait till tomorrow, I had all the time in the world in front of me to do so. At thirty I became aware of having to make choices: if I remained with the theatre group I was working with, I would no longer be able to do everything else as well. When life began at forty, I knew it was getting late for me to have children and that my travels with theatre had led me away from family life. And on this last year of the 1900s, when I am forty-five and my theatre group thirty-five, I have to admit that I am surrounded by young people who, wanting to work in theatre, look at me as a master, although I do not understand how this happened. Time just flew.

TIME IS GROWING

I started during the years when the body came into focus. Many of us were making theatre and not so many wanted to be spectators. It was first a question of doing; observation and learning came later. Theatre was the answer for a social need and rebellious spirit, for total involvement and fun. It was not a profession. The profession was false and distant. Physical training and the search for masters were not dictated by an apprenticeship that would give one the right to a job, but it was a fundamental part of our way of making theatre. We wanted to be good and to make our theatre better, because that widened the horizons of the social

involvement in what we were doing. We were very serious, but not as professionals, rather because of the value theatre had for us. What we learnt was learnt within the theatre groups. The young would get together amongst themselves to exchange what they knew and what they pretended they knew. The older generation was mostly looked upon with suspicion as they represented conservative forces and a practice that could no longer be interesting.

My generation grew up and had to decide whether they would make a living out of theatre and so turn professional, or remain amateur slowly disappearing from the horizon as other obligations took over. For many, the professional choice meant leaving the groups to teach in institutions.

Today many young people are back in theatre schools or taking theatre courses in universities. The opportunities to learn now are not so varied. Alternative schools exist, but are few. Some theatre groups take in young actors for training, but you have to be lucky to find the place where you belong. Travels to Asia, where masters still teach a craft, can be expensive. If you want to work in theatre, it seems that the traditional school system is all you have left. But what kind of actor or practitioner should a theatre school prepare? Television and film have greatly modified what an actor needs to learn. Marketing has become more important than diction, success more important than daily training, being natural more important than technique, attractiveness more important than presence, knowing how to use a microphone more important than singing. Acting as a craft is being lost at the same time as artisans disappear from industrial society.

Dissatisfied young people do not know where to turn. A spirit of survival takes them to endless workshops where they eventually feel the frustration of not having continuity or to schools where they slowly lose interest in their opposition to adapt to the needs of the

market. Only a few lonely souls keep going in search of a master, knowing there are not many about. The pedagogical relationship that for my generation was tied to a group, endlessly breaking up and coming together, has today become an individual search. We belonged to a movement and our particular needs were recognised as general, while now they are just particular. For the younger generation theatre seems to be a lonely territory to move in, and women especially are alone when they abandon the protective wing of family and partners. Newer networks are made up of individuals rather than groups and it is significant that the theme of the first meeting of Magdalena Second Generation in Argentina was solitude. In the other era, when I participated in the first Magdalena Festival in 1986, most of us came from groups and we searched for a moment of autonomy to go back to the groups stronger. It feels like a long time ago.

TIME IS WRINKLES

The son of a friend of mine has just turned eighteen. I still think of him as a baby when he played with chickens in Spain. The same friend's niece, whom we sometimes baby-sat, now asks my advice to sell her performance. The other night I had supper with the eighteen-year-old daughter of my cousin who is travelling alone in Italy. Her smile, her critical eye, her curiosity reminded me of her mother, whom I last saw at the same age, when I was already a lot older. I am invited to organisers' homes and I realise that they still live with their parents who are younger than I am. The organisers remind me of myself when I invited guests home, at the time when I lived with my mother and father and brothers in Milan. At a theatre meeting I visited recently, the workshop teachers were what I considered to be young and inexperienced. Others who were even younger and greener looked up to them. It comes as a shock, suddenly: I am older than my mother was, or even than my grandmother

was. But I don't think I have changed. I am the same. But that is not how the others see me. I wear the wrinkles of time.

TIME IS TEACHING

Amongst those who have chosen to be my pupils, three have imposed their presence in a more definite way: Ana, Leo and Hisako. "What have I taught them?" I could ask myself. "What have they learnt?" This is probably a better question, although it still will not receive an answer. In many ways they are more experienced than I am: Ana has read and remembers many more books, Leo directs films and Hisako has two little boys. I never taught them actor's technique, I rarely trained with them, I cannot say they have learnt a profession from me. But I was there. I gave them a chance to speak and formulate questions, and I answered some of the questions. I gave tasks. Usually my first advice to a young person is to not make theatre, but to choose something else, or go to the sea to lie in the sun. Why choose a profession that is in decline? Why choose to be a waiter to earn a living or join the mass of unemployed, while doing theatre for free? They have to convince me that they cannot help doing what they do. It is a choice already made.

In my relationship with them I am demanding, because that was important for me. I hope I am patient, because I know how long it took me. I am not always nice and I rarely give praise, probably because I know life is not easy. I can tease, because a sense of humour is always necessary and suffering can be self-indulgent. I directed a performance with Ana, I counselled Leo when she was assistant director to Eugenio Barba and I introduced Hisako to Odin Teatret. Now, with all of them, it is mostly a question of writing letters. But I think my example is still a valid reference for them, although it is a picture they keep alive more than I do. I am glad that I am a woman, so they can build from there.

My masters - at least those I have worked with continuously for a long time - have all been men. It has cost me a lot to find the autonomous image of a performer who can be feminine yet strong. I could not even see the examples close to me. My masters ended up being my partners. I had to find some friends. I needed the time of Magdalena.

TIME IS WOMAN

I participated in the Magdalena Project, a network of women in contemporary theatre, from its beginning. Magdalena was the necessary space within the theatre world where I could discover the differences about being a woman and where I could exchange professional experiences with women. Hearing women sing gave me confidence, having to document the activities obliged me to write. Magdalena had to do with me. For some of my friends this space was necessary as a reaction; the personal anger - born from the frustration of living in a world dominated by men and in theatres directed by men - was let loose to become creative.

Today the needs are different, a lot has been done. If at that time Magdalena was something that involved me at a personal level, now the younger women start with a motivation that already has a political vision. They are starting from where we arrived. The knowledge we had to fight for is part of their possibilities. They are ready for new battles. We started from personal necessities and moved towards awareness. The fact that the Magdalena Project changed us meant that it was so important to us. Later we became appreciative of the importance Magdalena had for others. The women who continue its work today, know of the importance of the project in the past and what it meant for others, but they still do not know what it is for them. The theme for the next meeting of Magdalena Second Generation in Argentina is origins. There is a need to go back in time in search of

an identity. There is a need to define one's own time and to define oneself in that time.

TIME IS CLOSED AND OPEN

Finding a master helps outline your identity. A master does not make things easy, but allows you to find your own strength by opposing a resistance. A master is a continuous reference while the world around keeps changing. A master is not necessarily a person, but could be the discipline of getting up every day, of training or giving. Travelling could be a master, offering a context, helping to put difficulties into proportion, introducing foreign habits and customs for comparison before you choose your own. A master helps keep a whole picture in mind when the information you receive is divided and contradictory. A master demands a reason for your actions. A master transmits often without explaining as the knowledge is passed down through experience. Women who understand the tacit language of actions find in theatre a privileged and protected field that allows them to be recognised as masters.

Until you feel strong and confident, until you unwittingly know who you are, searching for identity requires isolation. You remain amongst those who are similar in order to recognise your own culture and your own way of being. Later the walls can fall and contact opens to the world. Young people take strong standpoints and collaboration doesn't seem interesting to them, because collaboration calls for compromises. As time passes collaboration becomes enriching, bringing together what we have in common rather than pointing out differences. We discover that alliances are useful, when there is a gain for both parties involved. When your way of being is formed you are ready to meet, when you stand on your own feet the earth cannot be taken away from under you. When I was young, to meet people who did not think like I did was a waste of time. Now it is the opposite, as long as I have the time.

TIME IS YOUNG

When in 1976 I arrived at Odin Teatret, the theatre group I still work with today, I realised I knew nothing. I had to start building until I existed again. The sense of time changed. Before every day brought a variation and time passed slowly. Then days and weeks went by so fast that changes were calculated in years. Now time is measured by the productions, which are usually performed for four or five years. I have learnt to be patient. Some projects and ideas have to wait until their time comes. Meanwhile they queue up in my head. I have to make an effort not to be just running after the future, so as to achieve what has already been planned. Once I asked for a sabbatical year with the illusion that I could put the future in front again, and have new dreams. The result of all the free time was that I just worked harder than ever. There are more and more people to write to, more and more

productions to perform, more and more articles to put into writing, more and more rooms to clean, more and more days to remember, more and more travels to plan.

In New Zealand and Argentina this year I found a new tactic. I came with ideas and suggestions, which others - who have more time and energy than I have and who usually are younger than I am - can realise. I know that once a dream has been said out loud it has to come true. Once it is out in the open something has to be done about it. I invite the younger generation to speak about their wishes. As I listen, I am learning not to do it all myself. Maybe I will even learn to say no. As a performer after the time of action came the time of being, after the time of finding my voice came the time of silence. As a person, although I don't renounce being young, curious and active, although I still have so much to do, I can feel it is time to make priorities and save energy. It is time to let the



Julia Varley preparing for *Theatrum Mundi*.
Photo: Emidio Luisi

younger generation give what they have and don't have, it is time for them to do more than they think they can. So I invite them to take decisions and invent projects, to fight for what they want and be practical.

TIME IS TIME

I value the fact that the best I can give is always required of me and that I am not allowed to be content with mediocrity. I myself am especially demanding towards those closest to me. I am demanding with women because we have to take responsibility. We cannot be satisfied with complaining or pretending that there are no problems. We have to change something; we must have an influence on how the world near us is going. We have to be actively part of the history we are participating in. We have to invent the words and concepts that fit for the kind of theatre we do and want to do. This responsibility is shared by different generations. We can have more or less experience, our vision can be more or less wide open, we can be more or less generous, but we share the responsibility of taking a position towards a world based on values of quantity and success, of competition and superficiality. We share a responsibility in acting with quality.

My need for justice, my rebellion, my anger, my recognition of minorities, my desire to be happy is just the same as when I was young. In all these aspects I don't feel that I am so different from the women who are young now. When they invite me to see the places where they live or work, I know that I belong there. I don't come from another planet, I am similar, even if I don't wear platform shoes and

put earrings in my tummy button.

One thing has changed though: as time has gone by I have many more questions than before. First I knew, then I didn't know, then I was, then I unlearned what I knew and then others thought I knew. Now I feel curiosity and a wish to work growing again, as I discover an infinite amount of territory to explore within the details of what I did before. I have no securities and I must find new ways to move along. It is the time of questions and it is just a question of time for me to be there and also somewhere else.

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