

Leo Sykes

From My Diary

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1.6.2001 - BRASILIA, BRAZIL

When I first moved to Brazil my husband would introduce me to everyone saying, "This is Leo, she's English, but her Mum is from Kenya, her Dad's from Australia, she was brought up in Italy and she has just moved here from Denmark". Not surprisingly I found it hard to find any one to talk to. However, hearing this repeated description of myself did make me realise that travel is not just something I do a lot of, but it is something that I am the product of, both biologically and culturally.

My husband, Marcelo Beré, is a clown and has had a company, Circo Teatro Udi Grudi, for twenty years. In 1998 I directed them in a clown and music performance *O Cano* and in 2001 I directed them in an educational project *Embarque Nessa*.

Embarque Nessa is part of a project by the Brazilian Ministry of Tourism to create good citizenship, teaching about non-violence, ecology and human rights. They have the very civilised idea that before a place can be good for tourists to visit, it must be good for local people to live in. So they send us to perform in all the under-developed potential tourist areas in Brazil. This means very poor, very far away places. The show is to travel to one hundred and twenty municipalities all over Brazil. This kind of travelling, to each municipality, usually involves one or two planes, then eight to twelve hours driving, mostly on dirt roads.

As a director I have two contrasting attitudes to travel. In the first period of life of a show (maybe around a year), I find it essential to travel with the show as it is at this point. I can begin to refine the details, fill in holes, change things that really don't work, generally try to get the rhythm of the piece as fluid as possible. Once this period is over, I begin to lose interest in travelling, it is time to think about future projects.

Like many small scale companies, we are the artists, but also the administrators, producers, cleaners, etc. As someone has to stay behind and look after production and

administration, I did not go on the first six weeks of the national tour of *Embarque Nessa*. The show has suffered because in the absence of the director to make the changes and comments after each performance, the actors rely on the audience. They have become victims. All the more dangerous as the audience likes what it sees and therefore lets us forget that the show still does not work totally, still has problems, for which the audience forgives us. Luckily and unfortunately they forgive us. Unfortunately because they allow us to be weak, luckily because no-one wants tomatoes thrown at them. But the places this show is travelling to are so poor that not only have they never seen theatre before, they may never have seen tomatoes.

Last week the show was in the North East of the country, a region where it is so hot and dry that the people are like raisins, and so poor that the children fight with the dogs over the bones left on your plate. Marcelo told me he left a piece of chewed gristle on his plate and a child came and ate it. We don't know what it means to be this physically hungry. Do these people devour the show as they do the left-overs - too hungry to be discriminating? It is a big responsibility, this is no game. Society owes too much to these people and we must help them learn. Where to start, what to say, what information is truly essential, how much can we put in one show? Theatre is not a place for informing but for inspiring; there is no time for middle-class artistic aesthetics, we must help these people more than survive, we must help them *live*.

After the last show (a couple of days before we left for our three month tour of Europe) the road was blocked by the *Sem Terra*, a landless people's movement for whom Udi Grudi have performed many times. Marcelo got down from the van to negotiate to be let through, as they were

going to miss their plane. An old woman put a knife to his throat, but the clowns were finally allowed to cut across country to the airport.

I have a one year old daughter. Having been brought up in a variety of countries by parents who left their clothes in suit-cases instead of in wardrobes as it would make the next move easier, I am not daunted by the *idea* of travelling with a child, but I am daunted by the *reality* of travelling with a child.

In 2001, when Lola was six weeks old, we took *O Cano* to the Edinburgh Festival, the largest arts festival in the world. We became "known". Since then we have virtually not stopped travelling, which is of course wonderful, but it was also slightly mad timing as the arrival of a baby generally means staying at home, for a while at least. When I read reviews of our work at festivals I imagine that the director of this show must be some high-flown professional giving interviews and answering mobile phones in the hotel lobby. But I am not. I am the one with the huge bags under my eyes, soup stains down my front and needing to cut, or at least brush, my hair.

Recently we performed at the Curitiba festival, the largest theatre festival in Brazil. When our run finished we were invited to give four extra performances, what an honour, yes it was a good sign, but what did this actually *mean* for me? It meant that I had to wash all of Lola's clothes and Marcelo's costumes in the tiny basin in our hotel room and hang them to dry on every available bar and knob. So instead of going to the festival parties I stayed in with Lola and watched the laundry drip. Also Lola couldn't sleep in the squeaky hotel cot, so neither could we, and more worryingly maybe the rest of the hotel couldn't either.

We have a European producer, who saw

us in São Paulo and has now arranged our European tour of *O Cano*.

MUNICH, GERMANY

My journey began with three short flights, only a few hours after the long haul one from Brasilia to Munich. The long haul flight was taken with the four men (three clowns: Luciano Porto, Marcelo Beré and Márcio Vieira, and one technician: Luciano Astiko) of Circo Teatro Udi Grudi and our one year old daughter Lola. The three short ones I took alone as I stepped off the curb in the rainy Munich night and a car hit me. I flew from pelvis to knee to head, and as my head hit the tarmac I had time to think "this is the one that could kill me" and I screamed "no" to death so loudly, accompanied by a vision of Marcelo and Lola, that the angels heard me and I must have landed on their feathers.

People crowded over me as I lay in the freezing rain and so many strange thoughts passed through my mind. I am not dead and I am not going to die, the base of my spine hurts, I can feel my toes, I am cold, I am not wearing any knickers, it hurts, my baby, my baby, my baby, thank god it wasn't one of the actors...

And everyone asking me where it hurts, arguing amongst themselves as to whether they should move me or not. I realise that life is so much more fragile than love, it can end in an instant with no second chance, just when you think it is in full flow. As I flew through the air I was so focused on staying alive because of the people I love, whom I simply cannot abandon.

The people ask "who should I call?" and all I can say is "not my husband, he is with the baby and she'll get wet", but they find my hotel key on the road and call Marcelo who is suddenly there with Lola and the other actors appear and now I am just crying and saying sorry.

The ambulance comes and I am shaking so much with cold and shock that they keep missing my vein with the needle of something - I don't even know what it is.

It is so different from the films. We drive off very slowly, there is no siren. We get to a deserted hospital where I wait alone for ages as they have to call a doctor. All I can see is the ceiling and after they have x-rayed various parts of my body they tell us there are no fractures, it is a miracle.

Marcelo takes off my soaking clothes and puts his on me, my suitcase was lost at the airport so I only have the clothes I travelled in, my shoes are lying somewhere on the road, so the nurse gives me plastic bags to tie around my feet.

Today was really not my day.

MUNICH, GERMANY

I am lying on my back and staring out of the hotel window. I can see three black swallows, then as I stare longer I see many little forms of light darting, somersaulting and swimming through the air, so fast that they make the swallows look dull and slow. I think that the bang on my head must be affecting my vision and I look away and look back again. I realise that these are the angels who saved me and they have come to show themselves to me. They are saying hello.

I am reluctant to take the anti-inflammatories as I am still breast-feeding. Everything hurts and I cannot bend at all. But I am alive and fine. Marcelo and I hug each other at night.

21.6.2001

Marcelo has flu and a high fever, I can't move very well, but today we must set up in the circus tent where we are to perform in Munich's Olympic Park. We will perform for two weeks as part of a big music festival.

22.6.2001

Our first show in Germany. *O Cano* has almost no words, the actors try out a couple of German words. The show is chaotic. Tomorrow will be better. The sun has come out and we get free beer at the bar.

23.6.2001

The show is nearly sold out. One hour to go before we open and everything is nearly ready. A man we have never seen before arrives with another man from the fire department. They want to see the fire club swinging act that lights the end of the show. They declare that there must be someone present from the fire department at each show, the festival cannot afford it, we must cut the end of the show...

The fireman fingers our canvas set, "what interesting blue material", he says, "where is your fire-proof certificate?" The one we have from the Brazilian factory is not good enough, we must have a German one, but today is Saturday and the German assessment authorities are closed.

Forty-five minutes till the show starts, the audience is already queuing outside. They lift the flaps of the Big Top, anxious to get in. The fireman cuts off a bit of our canvas and sets fire to it. We are not worried, the Scottish fire-board cleared it last year. He says we must change the set or cancel the show.

Half an hour to go.

Marcelo is busy negotiating and keeping us calm. He is wearing a T-shirt that says "No Stress". The festival technician has some ugly yellow material slung over his shoulder. He suggests replacing our blue canvas with this, or he has black, but it will take longer to get.

We ask for black.

We are pulling down blue canvas and sticking up black - thirty metres of it in different configurations on three different structures. Once the black is up we start

putting all our props back in place. It is two minutes past the opening time and the technician complains that we are running late. I laugh, thinking this is a bad joke. It is no joke. We are no longer in Brazil. One hour before the show they ask us to change our entire set and then complain that we are running two minutes late...

The show goes well (one of the mysteries of theatre is why sometimes one performance goes better than others). I simply do not have the energy to get as pissed off as I should.

26.6.2001

Being on tour with a child can be lonely. While the others work and play I spend hours alone in the hotel room while Lola sleeps. My back still hurts from the accident, so when she wakes up it is hard to look after her properly, as since the crash I have discovered that parenting involves a huge amount of bending down and picking up, neither of which I can do without a lot of pain.

Today our first German review came out. We can't understand a word of it, but apparently it says we are very creative with rubbish.

27.6.2001

Luciano has an old knee injury, and today in the middle of the performance it gives way. He manages to finish the performance, but tomorrow we will have to cancel.

5.7.2001 - TUSCANY, ITALY

I am staying at my parents' house in Tuscany. I have left the boys to continue the German tour and come to show Lola to her grandparents, who have not seen her since she was new-born. It is also the first time that I have not been working since she was born and it is so wonderful to have time to really enjoy her and not just try and pacify her while I

attempt to do something else. She goes swimming in the sea and the lake, learns to eat spaghetti and ice-cream, and she learns to walk!

10.7.2001

Today we are to meet Julia Varley, as her parents also live in Tuscany and she is on holiday. We make a picnic and drive off to meet her.

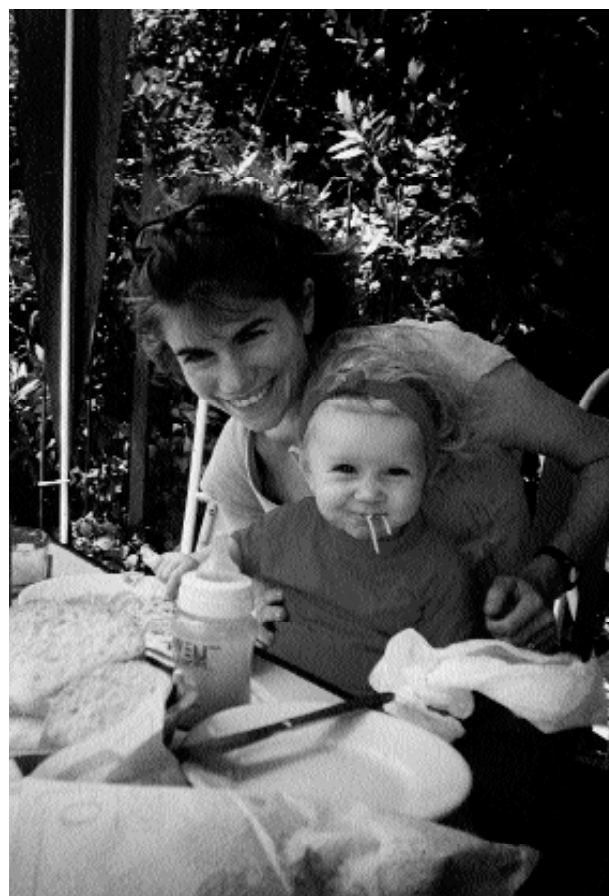
The "road" from my parents' house is more rock and rut than road. So the oil tank is ripped open on one of the rocks and we just make it to a nearby garage, who send us to another garage, who have just moved to another town. We get there, in what has turned out to be the only cold, rainy day of the Tuscan summer. Thank god for mobile phones and Julia. We meet her at a nearby cake-shop and she drives us around the wet Follonica streets. My parents, Lola and I, and Julia, plus all her luggage and our inevitable bag-fulls are crammed into the steamy car as Julia and I try and catch up on all our news.

29.7.2001 - LONDON, ENGLAND

Lola and I are staying with various friends in London. It is wonderful to see everyone (but I don't manage to see *everyone*), especially as some have had babies since I last saw them.

Even though my life is apparently madder than most of my friends', it is not more stressful. I stay with one friend who is a freelancer and has just had a baby. Like me she returned to work immediately after the birth, so as soon as the baby sleeps she leaps to the computer and works against the clock. Even Lola's laughter is a cause of stress as it may wake the baby and there is work to be done...

I stay with another friend who has an unbelievably manic three year old, and who is rebuilding and has just torn up all the floors in her house, so Lola, who is very keen



Leo Sykes with her daughter Lola

to try out her wobbly new walking skills is in constant danger of falling down holes or tripping on nails. We eat meals cooked in the microwave in the conservatory and wash up in the basin - there is no kitchen yet.

29.7.2001

The boys arrive in London after a two-day drive from southern Germany. They have spent six weeks touring Germany, I have not seen them for a month. They are very well, tired and come bearing good reviews and news. The last show in Germany was in a sold-out 1000 seater theatre with a stage made for operas with elephants. They had to do various encores and are very taken with the whole experience.

I make risotto for all of us and the two

households of friends who will be putting us all up. They will leave the day after tomorrow to drive to Scotland with our set.

31.7.2001 - EDINBURGH, SCOTLAND

It is my 35th birthday. I leave my wonderful friends in London and fly to Edinburgh with Lola. Marcelo meets me at the airport with flowers and a song. Lola runs around squeaking with her arms in the air and we head off to the university flat we will be staying in.

My mum arrives from Italy to help take care of Lola as the Edinburgh festival is an insane rush.

8.8.2001

We are now more than half way through the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Last year we came as unknown hopefuls, the press discovered us, gave us five star reviews, an Angel Award and many producers from other countries saw us and invited us to their festivals and that is partly why we are now on a three month tour. Last year we played to thirty people on the first day and on the last they had to put in extra seats, and still people didn't get in. *But* we didn't get paid. At the Edinburgh Fringe you pay all your own costs (travel, theatre hire, publicity, accommodation, etc.) and the box-office takings are yours. The company we performed for went bust and although we paid all our costs, no money ever came our way. So we are hard-nosed about Edinburgh now.

10.8.2001

What a *putaria*. The actors put their costumes on (which in the light of day and up close look a little tired after three years of touring) and traipse off into the drizzle of this chilly Scottish summer. We head for the High Street.

Although we have come back as one of last year's Award winning "hits" we are still

having problems getting enough audience in to cover the 350 pounds for two hours it costs us to rent the theatre we are in, not to mention travel and accommodation and publicity costs.

In the High Street we do a twenty minute number and hand out numerous leaflets, alongside the literally hundreds of other people in shabby, rain-bedraggled costumes doing the same thing.

We are met by many smiles and words of support from people who have seen the show, many more than once, which is amazing in this festival of too-many-choices.

But this is still not enough. We are the best selling show in our venue, the papers are saying the box-office takings are at an all time high, but we, nor most others, will not manage to cover our costs. The press have been great to us again this year, our posters are distinctive, we have a strong word of mouth following - methinks this festival is too expensive.

As I watch actors working in the rain, their costumes soggy and hair windswept, I think, this is no job for adults. *Titanic* star Kate Winslet was in our audience today. She is only twenty-six, she has a proper job. What do I mean by that? She earns proper money. She may well get a soggy costume and wet hair, but she will be paid lots of money to do so and she will be sure to have a large audience as a result of her efforts.

The best and the worst thing about Edinburgh is that it is open to all-comers, with no selection of any kind being made. This is great for people who are just beginning (I bought a student production here years ago), but it is awful for the audience who have no way of telling amateur rubbish (or indeed, professional rubbish) from the good shows.

We meet some Russian clowns. Their director has no legs, they have driven here

in a combie van. They had two people on their opening night, one of whom was a critic. He wrote that the show was not very funny. How are you supposed to be funny when there is no one to laugh?

11.8.2001

Edinburgh is such a beautiful city that at the moments when it stops raining it is just a pleasure to look at, the people are so warm that they make up for the cold climate.

Lola gets food poisoning. She loses a lot of weight. My Mum and she spend the days trapped by bad weather and ill health in the grim student flat. The highlight of their day is when the boys get home and play and sing raucously into the *wee* hours.

13.8.2001

Today we did our last show in Edinburgh, after which we packed the whole set into the van and the three clowns flew to Frankfurt and will then drive all night to Lucerne and begin giving a workshop about constructing musical instruments from alternative materials. They will arrive at six a.m. and start teaching at nine a.m. This is really too insane.

14.8.2001

Lola, Astiko, the technician (who is actually really a clown) and I fly to Lucerne. No risk of deep vein thrombosis for me. Lola walks up and down the two planes we catch making friends with everyone and patting sleeping people on the knee. She loves planes, actually she loves people, and planes are full of them and all the better as they are - literally - a captive audience.

I will start teaching on the workshop tomorrow.

LUCERNE, SWITZERLAND

This is another beautiful city. We are here to give a workshop, then we go to Ireland to

perform for a week, then back here for one show before heading up to Denmark.

A river runs through the town, molten snow from the Alps. The boys take off their clothes and jump from a bridge in the middle of town, they are carried down stream all the way back to our hotel. When I asked how they knew it was safe to do this, they answered that they saw a man jump off the bridge first. How do they know it was not a suicide attempt?

18.8.2001

There are five children on the workshop, between six and twelve years old. Most of them are great and all are very musical. There are a couple of problem children who seem to think that the instruments are for hitting others with.

Lola joins in the workshop, wandering amongst the other kids. She sees us putting different amounts of water into bottles and then blowing them to get different notes. At night in the hotel she picks up a water bottle, I think she is thirsty, but she blows into the bottle. It is such a privilege to be able to bring her up like this.

19.8.2001

We make a performance for the families of the kids on the workshop, the kids are great, even the little ones get it "right on the night". Much to my surprise I discover I like working with kids.

Days off are rare. In August we have none. When they happen it is so exciting to sleep, eat slowly and actually see the city we are in, that I don't do the laundry. Big mistake. It starts off as a little bag in the corner of our room, then it starts to spill out of the bag and becomes a dark creature lurking, soon it is a pile larger than most of the furniture. Anyone who has kids knows that laundry is about the biggest issue of child care.

The lack of time off, the absence of hotel rooms with double beds and the constant presence of Lola means that anything as romantic as sex on tour is almost too luxurious to happen. To travel with my husband, co-parent, co-producer, and actor means that we have very rich experiences in common, but it also leaves little breathing space. Sometimes I wonder if it is not best to stay behind like some other wives do...

DUBLIN, IRELAND

We fly to Heathrow, where we will catch a connecting flight to Ireland. We have forty-five minutes at the terminal. I go to the loo and leave Marcelo in charge of Lola. She discovers a play area with a tube structure she can crawl into. Marcelo is trying to get her out, but she won't come and he is too big to get into the tube. I manage to squeeze in and extract her. She has done a pooh and I must change her nappy, but Marcelo has gone to the Duty Free and I can't get her and all the luggage into the loo, so I decide to change her on the floor of the play area. I get her nappy off and as I reach for the baby wipes she escapes my grasp and heads bare bottomed across the terminal. For someone who recently learnt to walk, she is very nifty.

Finally we get on the plane to Dublin.

This is the first time all of us will go to Ireland and we are excited and a bit nervous. Our producer has argued with the theatre we are to perform in as they asked for a US\$ 1,000 discount at the last minute. He is furious as this is unethical and unprofessional.

The only thing I have heard about the Irish is that they are very friendly and very nutty. The taxi driver who takes us from the airport rolls and smokes spliff after spliff and talks on his mobile phone for the whole journey. When we arrive at the theatre he wants to fine us thirty pounds for soiling his cab. We have not dirtied his taxi, this guy is

a complete nutter.

The theatre is the most well-equipped I have ever seen, even the seating is automated. All the lighting is done by remote control and best of all, the iron is clean and does not stain our costumes.

We take a walk along a windswept promontory. Everyone says "hello" and Lola gets to talk to dogs galore. The two flights and long taxi ride have not lessened her enthusiasm for just about everything. Marcelo and I just trail after her.

22.8.2001

The opening night was great, a full house which always helps, and a very responsive audience. Marcio forgets he is to speak in English and starts in German, Luciano hisses "*inglés*" at him and we are away.

HOLSTEBRO, DENMARK

Home at last, but it is not Brazil. I spent five years of my life here and it is so wonderful to walk in to a room or down a street that is full of familiar faces and go to a festival I have worked on so I know the ropes. I relax for the first time. These are my friends, the people I love and respect. I would not want to live in Holstebro again, but the people of Odin Teatret and of Teatret Om, these are beautiful people.

And what a home-coming, I bring my baby and our performance. Eugenio Barba and other members of the Odin come to see it. I am not nervous, the show is very firm on its feet. It goes really well, the Danish audience, who are sometimes so silent, are noisy and they participate!

This was the best end of tour we could ever want. This has put all the humanity back into touring.

From Denmark we will go to Amsterdam to see friends, then on to Belgium to do some street work, then home - Brazil this time.

By the time we get on the plane to Brazil we will have driven almost 7,000 kilometres in a van packed with our set, personal luggage and the six of us. Only excessive amounts of chocolate have made this possible.

BRASILIA, BRAZIL

Home, and the world is exploding. Who is blowing it up? The Americans? We do not know yet, and what they will do in response is also unknown, but it is sure to be violent. We caught three planes yesterday, today passenger jets are high-jacked to kill thousands of others.

What a place this is. What happened to love, peace, intelligence, understanding, anything that might make this world better instead of worse?

Our cat is ecstatic to see us, all the family comes round. We are drunk with jet lag, but with only a few days here before we

set off again we have to see everyone and do everything.

19.9.2001 - BELO HORIZONTE, BRAZIL

After five days at home we are now in Belo Horizonte at a circus festival for four days, then home for a week, then Rio for a week then another two months of national tour all over the country. Then we have two months off, when I will direct a new show, and in February we are back on the road with the 2002 European tour, followed by Hong Kong and the USA.

Travel? Too busy doing it to write about it!

LEO SYKES (Britain/Brazil) is a theatre and film director. After graduating in Italian and Theatre Studies, she worked as assistant director at Odin Teatret, then as director with Teatret Om in Denmark and Teatro Udi Grudi in Brazil. Her short film *A Tale with Two Heads* has been presented in various film festivals.