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At the Feet of the Himalayas

A Cultural Exchange

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We performed the play
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*When you ride a horse,
balance comes not from locking
your legs to the saddle, but from
learning to float with the movement
of the horse as you ride. Each step
is a dance, the rider's dance as well
as the dance of the horse.
Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche*

From the Tibetans I have learned what, in reality, I have always known, but have had difficulty in accepting: that life fluctuates and nothing lasts. When I have the courage to see the beauty in our fragility, I am able to meet each new day with an open mind, happy just to live. Then I am able to understand that my life is a precious journey from its beginning to its end.

When I am travelling, when I move from one place to another, I live without demanding to know what the next day will bring. I expect the unpredictable. In the time it takes me to travel from one place to another, I feel free. I am able to live in the moment, which gives the journey an intense feeling of fullness, that often seems far away when I am at home.

In the last two and a half years I have devoted my time to another kind of travel, the one which is called flight; the travel that many exiled Tibetans have been forced into in order to survive. Since China occupied Tibet in 1959 more than one million Tibetans have been killed, and more than 125,000 Tibetans have been forced into exile in India, Nepal, Bhutan and the West.

In Nepal and India I met some of these Tibetans. Their journey has nothing to do with freedom. Most of those who managed to flee the mountains of the Himalayas, have lost everything; family, friends, country, language and culture. They have never had the possibility of choosing where they want to live. Very few of them can travel to other countries. They have to live in the country in which they were

received as refugees, and they cannot return to Tibet without the risk of losing their lives.

MY THEATRE JOURNEY

Since December 1982, when I participated in my first seminar with Farfa, Iben Nagel Rasmussen's group, I have been living with the theatre. It was not something I decided to do, it just happened. And then again I did choose the theatre. I believed in making the world a better place to live, by creating theatre performances, using theatre as a political tool. I was too young to have experienced the youth revolt of the 60s, but political meetings and work with grass-root movements were a big part of my daily life at that time. The idea of becoming an actress was very far from my thoughts. When I met the actors of Farfa, I realised for the first time that I belonged to the theatre.

Now I have been working with theatre for almost half of my life. I was educated at Århus Theatre Academy and was also a student of Toni Cots. I have lived and worked in France and Spain, and for seven years I was a member of Teatret Yorick, creating four performances with Anna Lica and Tage Larsen.

For about eight years I have been living in Sir, in the countryside near Holstebro in Denmark. My dreams belonged to Sir. I dug my garden, the earth was heavy and full of clay, I fought the weeds, and sang with nails black with soil. I fought the wind on my bike, in sun and rain. I worked like a horse and struggled for the things I believed in to make my dreams come true. It was mostly hard work, and often I asked myself what made me continue. Many years later I understood that the struggle to realise my ideas and projects was not only a fight for the theatre, but also a struggle to become the person I am.

The first time I travelled outside Europe was in 1994. After a divorce and a crisis I

went to Nepal, I needed a break and time for reflection. I walked in the Himalayas, and drove by car from Kathmandu to Lhasa. When I saw the beauty of Tibet, met the Tibetan people and realised how they were living in their own country under Chinese rule, I was deeply touched. I promised myself that I would go back to Denmark and report what I had seen. In Nepal and Tibet I met a lot of wonderful children, who were begging, asking for chewing gum and pens, and I wished I had something I could give to them. Since they had never seen a theatre performance, I decided to create a performance for children, which I could play in Denmark, Nepal and India.

In 1997 I founded Munin Teatret and created a performance for children directed by Else Marie Laukvik. The performance is called *The Raven's Return from Beyond* and is based on a myth. A raven sets out to sea from the coast of Greenland, and by mistake he flies into the mouth of a whale. Inside the belly of the whale he meets the whale woman, Baléna. She has a lamp he isn't allowed to touch. The lamp is her heart; Baléna is the soul of the whale. The raven doesn't know this. He breaks his promise and touches the lamp. Baléna dies and the raven survives. He becomes rich from the money he earns by selling the meat of the whale. This old Eskimo myth was useful in describing what had happened in the last fifty years of Tibet's history.

After seventeen years, I was back at my starting point, almost unconsciously. I was about to create a cultural exchange project between Denmark and Tibet, between one of the poorest countries in the world and one of the richest. With the painter and stage designer, Sisse Jørgensen I was going to make a political project that used theatre and visual art as a pretext to get an opportunity to live with the exiled Tibetans for a while.

FROM IDEA TO REALITY

My idea was to make a cultural exchange project between Danish children in Western Jutland and Tibetan children living in exile in Nepal and India. Four school classes from four different schools took part in the project: class 6 at Naur-Sir School in Holstebro, Denmark; class 5 at The Rolf Krake School in Holstebro; class 5 at Mt. Kailash School in Pokhara, Nepal; and class 6 at Chauntra School in India.

From March to December 2000, the students at the four schools created a theatre performance in four parts in collaboration with Sisse and me. We made one performance at each school. As it wasn't possible to travel with the children from the beginning, we decided to let the children meet each other through the work we did with them. But we are planning to get the Tibetan children to Denmark in summer 2003, to create a performance where students from all four schools take part.

The idea of the project was to let the children exchange experiences, and teach each other about their different ways of living. They had to define what the project was about, they had to create not only the performances they took part in, but also to describe their own culture and explain what it means to them to be Danish or Tibetan.

They have written the texts of the four performances, made dances, songs, costumes and stage design. They have written letters to each other. In our luggage we brought poems, stories and photos, a slide projector, two hundred slides, video-letters, tapes, pencils, booklets and the fairy-tales by Hans Christian Andersen. We also took my children's performance with us.

THEATRE? WHAT'S THAT?

Mt. Kailash School, where the third part of the exchange took place, is in West Nepal, in the Tibetan settlement of Tashi Palkhiel.

More than 1,200 people live in the settlement, and many of the children and young people are the third generation of Tibetans who fled from Tibet at the beginning of the 60s.

The settlement is surrounded by the very high mountains of Ana Purna. The place is very beautiful and we were received with great hospitality and curiosity. As the result of a misunderstanding, the headmaster of the school, Mr. Lobsang, wasn't informed of our arrival. He didn't know anything about our project and hadn't received our letters and programmes, so we had to improvise from the very beginning. My long description of our project was not much help, we had no other choice than to begin.

My heart was trembling when I went through the settlement in my raven costume to play my first performance in Nepal. Fortunately the audience had fun, and after the performance fourteen students signed up for the drama classes. They had never heard about theatre, but they understood the word drama.

THE WITCHES IN THE FOREST OF BIRDS

Like the students at The Rolf Krake School in Denmark, the children were given the task of choosing an animal they liked and asked to write a story about this animal. From the children's stories we created the third part of our cultural exchange, which was called *The Witches in the Forest of Birds*.

I had never before worked with children in a country other than Denmark, and here we were at the feet of the Himalayas, working in English with fourteen happy, curious and open minded Tibetan children, who had never participated in a theatre performance before. The school didn't have a gymnasium, so we had to rehearse in the garden of the guest house. We started with different kinds of drama exercises, played different games, created dances and sang.

Slowly I introduced the children to character work, I let them look for their "inner animal", and find their "inner theatre space".

It was very nice to find the same kind of shyness between the girls and boys that I knew from Danish children, the same restraint when the boys were going to sing, and the same modesty when the girls had to fight. The first time the "animals" had to move, almost nothing happened, and when I asked the children to find the different sounds of their animals, they went silent. However, eventually they all forgot their shyness when we put music on our tape recorder, and after this there were many times when I could hardly hear myself speak.

Day by day the children got more courageous and they managed to loosen up. It was very nice to see how the young actors devoted themselves to the work with characters, how they cared about their costumes, and how they enjoyed wearing make-up, and posing for the camera.

On October 13th, 2000, we performed *The Witches in the Forest of Birds* for the first time. It was a fairy-tale created by the children, a story with songs from Greenland and Tibet, Tibetan dances and Michael Jackson songs. We performed the play twice in the council hall of the settlement. Theatre had once more proved that it can be useful in creating direct contact and open hearts, preparing the way for new friendships.

CHAUNTRA IN VIEW

The fourth part of our exchange was in danger, as we were denied visas for India. The Indian Embassy in Copenhagen was unable to issue our visas before we left Denmark, which was why we had to wait four weeks at the Indian Embassy in Kathmandu before we were allowed to enter India. Perhaps the Embassy wanted to stop our project - we will never know - but a process that normally takes between one and



Panther from *The Forest of Birds*
Photo: Sisse Jørgensen

six weeks, took more than three months.

After our long stay in Kathmandu we were excited to meet our new students at Chauntra School. Chauntra is a small village in North India, two hours drive from Dharamsala, which is the town where the Dalai Lama lives, and where the exiled Tibetan government is located. Chauntra is divided into two, an Indian village with market and shops, and a Tibetan settlement, situated around the school. Last year the school had 340 students in total from the children in the kindergarten to the students in class 8.

The teachers at the school were all young, and when they played cricket with the children in the afternoon, it was difficult to distinguish between them. In spite of the free atmosphere at the school, the children were very disciplined, perhaps because most of them are from very poor areas in India. From very young they have experienced how difficult life can be, and they know that education is the only way to change their



living conditions; therefore they do whatever they can to get good results at school.

Because of our late arrival in Chauntra we had only two and a half weeks at our disposal, and as we arrived at exam time, we could not start our exchange at once. Therefore we used our first week in Chauntra to follow their normal school lessons and get to know class 6. The children were shyer than the students in Nepal, and we thought it would be difficult to make a good contact with them.

THE STORY OF THE RAINBOW GIRL

In Chauntra we also played my performance, showed slides and videos from Denmark, and let the children write to their new Danish pen-friends, before we started to create the performance. We also gave the children the task of choosing an animal or a fairy-tale figure with whom they would like

to work. Seventeen small fairy-tales were written, and from this material we made the fourth part of our exchange project, which was called *The Story of the Rainbow Girl*.

The students gave all they had - heart and soul. They really let go, when we worked on the floor. If we asked them whether they wanted to have a break or wanted to continue, they always chose to go on with the work. As we didn't have enough time to work with text, we made a performance almost without words.

For six days we worked non-stop. We played, improvised drama exercises, sang, created dances, made costumes, photos and videos. On December 12th, 2000, we premiered our performance about the Rainbow Girl, and told the story of what she has to go through to get married to the King of the Lions.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Since we came back to Denmark, the children from the four schools have written letters to each other, and we have premiered the fifth part of the exchange, a slide show about the whole project.

I have given the slide show at different schools in Denmark, using it as an educational tool about Tibet. Danish schoolchildren are offered a lot of educational possibilities, and they can be quite fussy about what they want or don't want, so I was forced to stimulate their curiosity. To keep their attention I chose to make a show, the form of which was somewhere between a normal lecture and a performance. What attracts the attention of the children are the costumes, the prayer flags, the incense and the music. As part of discovering all these new things, they can forget themselves for a short time, and let the beauty of the slides and the different culture into their classroom.

A SONG TO THE VARIETY OF THE WORLD

I have been dancing with life, my legs locked to the saddle, I have lost my balance, been thrown off my horse and jumped on it again. I have been galloping on the beaches of Denmark and in the mountains at 4,000 metres.

In Denmark people are getting more and more intolerant. Nobody wants to admit this, but many people want to stop more refugees from coming into Denmark. After September 11th we have got an "excuse" to think in this way.

I want to sing my song to the diversity of the world. I will open my mouth and sing about the beauty, about all the different colours, the smells and traditions. I will sing about the smiles of the Tibetans, about the peaks of the Himalayas, and the whale songs. I will sing about everything in the world that

is exceptional.

I feel that only by accepting the unique can we come closer to a more peaceful way of living. As long as we refuse to understand that tolerance and knowledge are very important if we want to change the living conditions of the people who need it most, I am afraid we will never be able to get closer to a more peaceful world.

I think that it is we who live in the Western world that should act, if Tibet is to be given back to the Tibetans; it is we who have the authority in the United Nations, we who have the power to change the customs regulations, the exchange market and bank interest rates.

I think we will lose something very precious if Tibet disappears totally. Without the Tibetans, the Afghans, the Palestinians, the Eskimos and Africans, I think we will all become poorer, perhaps not in a material way, but in our souls. We will die a little, as Baléna died when the raven took her lamp.

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MARIANNE BLICHFELDT (Denmark) worked with Teatret Yorick, until she founded her own company, Munin Teatret, in 1997. She has been touring her children's performance *The Raven's Return from Beyond* and is searching for funds in order to carry through the next stage of the cultural exchange project between Danish and Tibetan children.