

Birute Mar

An Actor's Shadow

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"non-theatre" in theatre.*

The greatest mystery in art is how all of a sudden something absolutely new is born from obscurity, inner chaos and intuition. The space opened by the coming performance is full of opportunities; it is a tempting maze of genre and roles. It presents a character that you attempt to get closer to and to get to know like someone you have met for the first time, or like the unexpected inner sound of the line and rhythm of a poem that does not yet exist.

Women who have transcended boundaries and forced themselves to speak will always remain somehow veiled in mystery. The past century produced Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham and Pina Bausch, who all pushed dance in unique directions; Ana Akhmatova and Marina Cvetajeva, whose poetry reached such tragic depths of human existence in non-feminine ways, and Marguerite Duras, the autobiographical poet, film director, playwright, and rare analyst of male and female relationships.

These are people I admire; people who managed to go beyond limits. Unfortunately, playwrights usually give women an "exclusive" place in their plays, allowing for only one or two of them among many men. Actresses therefore have to wait for their dream role. This is one of the reasons I decided to work on my solo performances some years ago: *Words in Sand* (based on Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days*), *The Lover* (based on Marguarite Duras' *The Lover*) and *Antigone* (based on Sophocles' *Antigone*).

For many, solo performances often lack the promise of on-stage animation. However, the natural excitement of actors who work with the solo form often produces original works which disclose the magic of acting.

My first solo performance experience (*Words in Sand*, a play for piano and voice, with costume by J.Rimkute and music by A.Kucinskas) and its tours to various international solo festivals, gave me the opportunity to discover the great intimacy and authentic stage creation possible in the "theatre of one actor". This performance also gave me the chance to collaborate with a group of artists who chose the

solo form as well as the opportunity to meet theatre experts and audiences interested in such work. But the most important thing was the opportunity to perform in front of an audience.

During festival meetings and discussions, we talked about solo performances as a great test of professionalism and an opportunity to reveal the actor as an artist. I recall somebody aptly referring to actors alone on stage as being "organists and the organ at the same time". They know exactly when and which keys to press inside themselves, so that original music is played. Somebody voiced a hypothetical thought that had been floating in the air: could it be that solo performances today are a new development for theatre, like a silent return to an old and forgotten tradition? In the context of "vociferous" theatre, all of a sudden we can hear the voice of a solitary human being.

I remember my first impression in the ancient amphitheatre at Paphos in Cyprus a few years ago, when for the first time I stood up on the magic echoing stone in the middle of the stage and my voice rippled through the space out to the blue sea on the horizon. This is what the first actors did - standing on the ancient Greek stage, the sound of their voices telling tragic or comic stories about the gods and about the fate of human beings. This lonely voice was enough to make hundreds of people listen. The chorus was only an echo of that voice.

The prize I received at the International Solo Festival in Moldova, a statuette of the ancient Greek dramatist Ion holding an ancient mask, also reminds me of ancient solo performances. During my studies of Noh theatre, traditional Nihon Buyo and modern Butoh dance, I was fascinated by the fact that theatre in Japan seemed to be all about unique solo performances.

...I used to think that I would learn to talk alone. By that I mean to myself, the wilder-

ness. But no. No, no.

Samuel Beckett

Starting to work as a solo performer was a frightening experience for me. I needed to find determination for this self-exposing form of face-to-face communication with the audience. I was face-to-face with Winnie, the character of the play, the woman forgotten by everyone as she was growing older, the woman sinking into the ground, into the sands of the past, looking for those who will really hear her.

When I read the play for the first time ten years ago, I did not think at all about what kind of character Winnie was. But all of a sudden there came a desire to speak those meaningless meaningful words that Beckett put into Winnie's mouth.

Theatre critic D. Sabaseviciene later wrote about this performance: "Of all the chamber and polyphonic performances, a solo is the least comprehensible and least acceptable. Theatre without conflict is impossible, and in a solo only one person crashes upon the stage: she is in conflict with herself and with the environment. On the other hand, a solo might be the easiest way to achieve poetry, since the very genre dictates the personal relationship with the work."

Actually, with Winnie's role you must be completely alone in the "wild", as Beckett put it. The fragile boundary between the character and yourself, and between yourself and the audience, must disappear. Only then will they listen and believe you. It is an opportunity to experience the illusion of "non-theatre" in theatre.

Such a role compares to writing a poem in silence in a space of vibrating human energy. The next line is dictated by a smile or sigh on the other side of the footlights, and not by the conflict given by the playwright or by the meaning of the stage setting



Photo: Arturas Valiauga

Birute Mar in *Antigone*, 2002

imagined by the director.

Everyone dreams of a role that gives you the greatest imaginable freedom, a role that enables you to identify yourself as a human being with that particular fate, a role that allows you to turn to the audience and have nothing to hide while presenting yourself absolutely "naked". That role is a kind of "non-role".

Now, each time I go on stage "imprisoned" in Winnie's heavy skirt and climb on Winnie's pedestal, and hear the wake-up bell ringing to begin another happy day, I never

know what the first response of the audience will be. Sometimes they smile and other times for some reason they become tense. They wait openly or they expect nothing. "Another happy day..." says Winnie. She is being cheerful or ironic - every time it is different.

To be natural, but wearing a mask.

Albert Camus

I would like to wear a mask that would purify the sense of our human existence and maximise our joy or sorrow and reveal the ups

and downs of our hearts, a mask that an everyday face cannot reflect. Ancient theatre was like that.

Our masks are our roles or reanimated pictures painted by someone: the characters that we have never been and now have the opportunity to become. It is true that when we choose the acting profession, it is as if we become phantoms wearing character masks. When we put those masks on we seem to grow further from ourselves as this gives an illusion of becoming free, of being someone else. Dancers of Japanese Butoh apply white make-up to their faces and bodies before going on the stage; they become the "dead". This is a philosophy of Butoh: to die for the soul to be born again.

Wise Samuel Beckett called a character an actor's shadow that continues to live when the show is over. This shadow is bigger than the actor who leads it in the footlights. It appears and disappears as ineffably as our sadness, memories and tears do, as everything that exists only in the moment but that consists of our lifetime's clothing. The character lurks within; you put on its attire as if you were dressing thoughts with a poem.

It may be that it is not only shows for one actor that can be called solo performances, but also every separate role that places an actor face-to-face with themselves, bringing them closer to the line of reincarnation, to an absolute honesty that can be achieved through a polished mastery. When an actor comes down from the pedestal as if weary of theatre, stage settings, costumes, make-up and partners, all of a sudden, he or she turns back to the audience and says: I am like one of you. Then a miracle happens; having recognised themselves, the audience begins to listen and act instead of the actor. Is it not a mirror-reflection of the present world: the frailty of human existence and intuitive striving for survival? Hearing one's

own voice?

Winnie, buried up to her neck in the ground, says at the end: "Ah well, not long now, Winnie, can't be long now, until the bell chimes for sleep. Then you may close your eyes, then you must close your eyes - and keep them closed... I used to think... I say I used to think there was no difference between one fraction of a second and the next..."

Slowly you become Winnie and have to listen to the rhythm of her life's seconds, to the irony that sometimes is sad, sometimes playful. You have to see the world with her weary eyes; to rummage endlessly in her old bag, to lay out cheap, dusty little properties, constantly forgetting something. You have to brush your thin white hair, to finish erratic thoughts and bits of recollections. Then suddenly take off the "mask" so that everyone thinks that it is only a character.

Is it really so? Or is it only in my imagination that the shadows are so powerful, that their fury lasts beyond the end of a scene? "This repetition, this lie, night after night."

Translated from Lithuanian by Gabija Miniauskaite

BIRUTE MAR (Lithuania) was born in 1969 and studied at St Petersburg Academy of Theatre, Music and Cinema. She worked as an actress with the Lithuanian National Drama Theatre between 1994 and 1997, when she moved to Japan to study Noh, Nihon Buyo and Butoh dance. In 1999 she was nominated as the best Lithuanian young theatre artist.