

Ana Woolf

Looking for the Antidote

1ST STAGE: CHILDHOOD INNOCENCE

When I was a child, I always used to say that I would be a doctor when I grew up. Not content with this, I would add that I would invent a vaccine against cancer, in order to help people so they would not die. I was also going to look after the poor and accompany Marcelo (my soul brother) to shanty towns. To practise, I would steal my grandmother's medical instruments and her stethoscope, and torment anyone who would let me take their blood pressure or listen to their heartbeat. I gave water injections to all the pillows at home until the day, when, grown up, I entered the faculty of medicine at university. This made my parents happy, but not so me. Playing was over. I no longer had friends or pillows in front of me, but grey and green dead bodies, kept in formalin, that had to be observed, touched, cut, moved, in order to understand human anatomy.

I was the only one who thought that the corpse lying before my fellow students and me had once been a human being with its own history, someone who had probably walked along the same streets as we did. It is impossible to pull apart a chicken while thinking that it once was the cockerel that pleased us with its morning call. I fought this feeling for two years. I was not struggling to understand the study materials, but fighting with a necessity that did not connect with me, with an illusion that involved my parents, that we had created together between childhood and adolescence, games and dreams. I wanted to read and write and play and not be locked up with dead bodies. They were too real.

Literature became my destiny and theatre my hobby. I remember that I thought the struggle for my future had melted away. My world was in order now: the university, surely a future as professor in the faculty, and then theatre at weekends, in neighbourhoods and community centres. Again, everybody was happy and I was discovering once more that the place where I really struggled and for which I fought was another place altogether. I had endless arguments

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to gain myself rehearsal hours because "a nice girl cannot come home on her own at three o'clock in the morning after a theatre class" and because "what future can theatre give you, and of what use is it?" I struggled without asking myself why. I struggled without knowing I was doing so. I struggled, as Rilke says, because I "would have to die if it were denied", or I would fall ill.

If everybody says "no", I tend to say "yes". Of course they used to say I was capricious. I still am, but in a deep down long-lasting way. It was not a teenager's clash. On the contrary, for many years I stubbornly defended, and still defend, the only space that frees me and gives me a vision of reality in return, which I am not able to catch sight of while immersed in reality itself. It is not a space that allows me to escape from some terrible and cruel exterior world. It is the place where I can try to decode, read, understand and learn about this exterior world - which is so external to me, but at the same time so present - through a different language from the one in which it is usually presented to me. It is also the place from which I start in order to carry my desire for a new understanding, a different vision from the one given to us by the outside world,

towards this same outside world. And the outside world calmly answers me that there is still a long way to go to find the antidote to cancer.

2nd STAGE: ADULTHOOD AND COMMUNITY

I always enjoyed studying on my own. I could not stand the idea of endless hours of group work in the houses of some school or university mates or the practical jobs that had to be done in a group. They meant long talks - made longer because of being Argentine - marked by the rhythm of *mate*, more chats, the reading of a page, and so on. I preferred to finish my work quickly and go to rehearse with my theatre colleagues. They were not a real group, just a temporary one. I discovered that a group was, and still is, an impossibility for me. I am sociable, but I don't like staying in rank.

I had worked in a group for some years, training in a way that has eventually turned into my own language. Later I worked alone for the same number of years. I discovered, suffered and enjoyed being alone every morning when the door to the rehearsal room opened. Nobody was there to help me choose to enter the room. Yet I entered. It was a concrete fact. It was a struggle to wake



Ana Woolf preparing for *Summa Summarum* with Teatret Om, Argentina, 2003. Photos: Emanuela Bauco

up with the prospect of "once again, all over again". I did it because "*je dois*" (I must), without asking myself why I had to or still have to. Once again I knew I had to insist on making experiments in order to discover the vaccine against cancer.

For three years, I have been working again with a group, and in Denmark. I am struggling to learn once more how to share the work space, which used to seem so lonely and now appears so full of presences that simultaneously disturb me and keep me company. Once again I find myself fighting every morning in order to remain present, in every sense of the word, there where I choose to be.

Teatret Om is a theatre group located in Denmark, made up of a Danish woman and four immigrants from Italy, Japan and Argentina. We do not receive subsidies of any kind, only financial support from the town when one of our projects is approved. Denmark is more than expensive, especially for somebody coming from Argentina, where the minimum wage has gone down to 100 Euros a month after the economic crisis of two years ago. To remain in Denmark, individually or as a group, implies trying to sell our performances independently and, at the same time, to produce new projects and ideas. Otherwise, each of us will have to go back home. I know we struggle silently, every day, for our survival in a country that seems to be indifferent to the idea of the kind of theatre I dream of. In the streets of the small towns where we usually perform, the pedestrians do not stop or turn round to see what is going on. Curiosity seems to have been tamed in Danish private and public life.

We struggle in order to survive in a country whose mother tongue, culture, food, temperature, way of greeting and saying good morning, are foreign to us. Yet we stay because we are close to a group we have chosen as a guide, Odin Teatret. And we

stay also because this culture consists as well of a friendly home, of great generosity, that provide us with the tranquillity of working professionally without concessions, and without rushing around on undergrounds and buses, stressed out by city life. Our worries about survival are tinged with the unimaginable and utopian possibility of shutting ourselves up for at least a couple of hours a day, in order to search for antidotes for cancer. We do this even though in this illusory Danish peace it seems that all possibility of carcinogenic elements has been exterminated. We run the risk of thinking and believing that cancer has really been eliminated. We stay also because...

My application for a visa to stay three extra months in Denmark has been rejected. I spend sleepless nights, imagining that I will become an illegal immigrant and that if they find out, I will be sent back to Argentina. How can we fight against a policy that is more and more right-wing, against a European Community of open doors (what a paradox!) only for those who are already inside?

I am on the train to Copenhagen. I see the cover of the train magazine: two black women wearing the Danish railway uniform. One smiles showing a row of white teeth, the other smiles as well, but in profile - I think that perhaps she has a missing tooth.

Bibish og Rita, DSB i nye farver (Bibish and Rita, the Danish Train Company in new colours). My little Danish allows me to understand the sentence. I open the magazine: "*Konduktøren kommer fra Congo*" (The conductor comes from the Congo). I turn the page: two men, again coloured, again smiling. Kafi and Rahid (from Palestine and Northern Iraq) add two more colours to the Danish trains. I think of Kafka's Joseph K in *The Trial* standing before the offer of innocence certificates. I think of Orwell's pigs in *Animal Farm*. We are all equal before the

law, but some are more equal than others. The Danish Train Company does not put white Danish people on the cover of its magazine and my group has to justify why it wants to have a *ny farve* (a new colour) in the company and not a Danish person. I realise that the question is not that cancer does not exist, only that it is hidden, expelled or transformed.

3rd STAGE: IN SEARCH OF THE ANTIDOTE

We tour Italy, South America and Yugoslavia to meet people who stop and ask: "What is going on? Who are they?" Twice a year I travel to Argentina, my country. Each time we arrive in one of these places I reconfirm my wish to go on searching for the antidote. Each time I arrive in Buenos Aires, for the first few days I fight all the time and everywhere against a feeling of losing all sense of meaning; for example, while I watch the news which shows children from the North of the country, malnourished and starving. The feeling comes when I see demonstrations by the unemployed, or by those recently sacked from a factory, or whilst I look at children who search the rubbish for cardboard to sell. What am I doing in Denmark? What am I doing in this quiet country, isolated from what I consider the world to be, at least the world I want to be a part of?

The first few days in Argentina, I am in perpetual shock. I am paralysed. I do not train, I do not rehearse. Usually I have to present my solo performance *Seeds of Memory* and therefore I start writing long letters to Julia Varley, asking her what is the sense of making theatre in the middle of all of this. I walk and walk the streets trying to discover an entrance into this reality from which I feel I escape every time I am far away. I wonder what is really useful in this context, what to do with what I have chosen, what is its use if it is futile? Julia

answers again and again: "You have to do your work well".

I start moving again. I go jogging in a square. Others are running like me. It seems that we are struggling to keep our breathing slow and our bodies in good condition. In a corner of the same park I see people with shopping trolleys rushing. They are the "*cartoneros*" who search the rubbish for their survival: cardboard and waste paper that they sell to factories that recycle them. I think: "Some of us struggle for pleasure and to keep in good form. Others struggle for real survival and for a form that will keep them going."

And as a woman? I never thought I would work or struggle together with women. But getting to know organisations like the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo or the Magdalena Project has also defined areas of struggle within myself. I re-contact the threads of my original vision of theatre when I travel to certain countries and realities, or when I experience spaces created by the Magdalena Project with events like *Transit* in Denmark or *Voix de Femmes*, directed by Brigitte Kaquet in Belgium. There I find the connections with the human quality that for me is at the heart of theatre making, including the inevitably painful parts. I have to accept these, even if the fast and concrete action that is expected, needed and demanded from theatre can imply having to give up achieving a perfect technique. I struggle in order to find the way to accompany specific social and political issues with an active presence and not remain shut up in a space distant from people. But still I am not able to find the form that allows me to reach the conjunction between these two realities.

To be part of the Magdalena Project allows me to approach a reality made up of women who fight for artistic survival as part of gender survival. Some of them struggle for



After *Summa Summarum* with Teatret Om, Argentina, 2003. Photos: Emanuela Bauco

a presence in which the artistic element is secondary, because they haven't yet got basic social recognition, a space in which to be heard publicly.

For the past three years I have worked with a group of young women from Yugoslavia. The bodies of these girls are marked by war. Their physical and emotional reactions are governed by that experience. Some of them belonged to well-known music groups, with various successful chart hits to boast of, but now they are so frail they move me to tears when I look at their eyes which are like those of wounded birds. They told me: "We gave up singing, in '92, because of the war."

4th STAGE: ACTION ALWAYS AND FOREVER

From this place I reconsider what my struggle is today, for and within theatre. I ask myself again and again what it means and what I mean when I say "theatre". I conclude that I am not interested in "theatre", but in the "theatre effect". I am interested in the effect that theatre as a concrete and, I believe, powerful action produces on those who act and react, on actors and on active and passive, voluntary and involuntary spectators.

After years of insisting on training and looking at the theatre act from a particular point of view, I believe that it is not training that modifies the depth of my stage presence now. It is instead the different kinds of experience that traverse my life and how I process them through my trained body, a body that has acquired and mastered a basic language, that acts and reacts, looks and walks according to a specific and pre-established code.

Political and social issues have always had a relevant weight for me, just as relevant as theatre. Simply because struggle for me is artistic, social and political. A concept of theatre disconnected from political struggle and class-awareness (if this is how fighting for a better world can be named) does not exist in my imagination nor in my reality. If theatre has action as its soul, action is also the cell of any kind of struggle. Theatre is in itself a struggle.

Struggle without action does not exist, and, as we already know, no action can be conceived remote from struggle. For me as a woman theatre practitioner, this is an empirical truth. It comes from everyday practice, from my body's daily struggle in a totally empty space waiting for a meaning that can

be given only by the meeting of the body and its struggle with the empty space, by the tension created between them. Action is also the product of the meeting between myself and another person; between two wills that agree against a third, or that disagree among themselves.

Today I am positioned between the anxiety for the things I really want to change and the struggle to learn to be patient. I stand in between my teacher's voice that keeps on repeating "keep calm, keep calm, keep calm!" and the attempt to understand that in art "there is no measuring with time, no year matters, and ten years are nothing. Being an artist means, not reckoning and counting, but ripening like the tree which does not force its sap and stands confident in the storms of spring without fear that after them may come no summer. It does come... patience is everything." (Rilke again)

In between patience and calmness, the question is how to keep up the tension that keeps the desire for action alive. The struggle for me today is also to try to keep faithful to what I say are my endeavours and beliefs. I should not forget my first steps and I should pay attention to the lie that always emerges behind the big words that sometimes come out of me and convince me. Today my struggle consists of asking myself constantly as a woman, and as a woman who makes theatre, what is true about all the things I say. And when I have found the answer, my struggle consists of operating according to the line of action set up by my true intentions.

The onion has many layers; *Peer Gynt* already showed us this. Many layers still remain to be peeled off, cleaned and put in order. In the meantime, without forgetting my childhood dreams, I will try to keep up my wish to invent the vaccine against cancer. If somebody invents it before me, I hope I will think of something else to invent.

If this does not happen, it will either mean that I am dead or that this path that I believed to be mine was just one of the many failed skirmishes remote from a real struggle, from what I call my sickness, from a real desire for rebellion.

CODA

I walk along the corridor of a hospital in Buenos Aires. Smells and sounds from different rooms reach me. Every room is a world of its own. Two women are talking at the corner of the corridor, a young doctor and a forty-year-old woman who is anxious and anguished.

The doctor:

"And... the operation was difficult."

The woman:

"What are you trying to tell me?"

The doctor:

"He had metastasis all over."

The woman (more and more desperate):

"What do you mean?"

The doctor:

"We did our best for him."

The woman:

"What are you trying to tell me? Has he died?"

The Doctor nods her head.

Translated from Spanish by Maria Ficara

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