

Julia Varley

Ironed Sheets

GETTING UP

Sometimes it is a real struggle to get up in the morning. The bed is warm and comfortable. The pillow has taken the shape of my head and the duvet covers me from top to toe. Outside it is dark and cold. I have to go to the theatre. Work needs to be done. I could telephone and say I am ill... I have never done it. I feel so, so tired. My body is heavy; my eyes don't want to open. The alarm clock has rung. If I don't get up I will fall asleep again. Denmark in the winter is not inviting at six in the morning. Training, meetings, rehearsals, performances, preparing props and costumes, packing, unpacking, opening e-mails, answering letters, making accounts and tour plans, archiving, cleaning, reading, being a spectator, teaching, directing, learning texts, moving piles of paper from one side of the table to the other - routine can give the energy of discipline or need a strong daily motivation. The others are expecting me. We all need to be there. This is what I think. If I don't do what I have to do today, tomorrow will be worse. I get up.

Sometimes my friends worry. "How are you?" they ask. I usually answer that I am fine because I do not have time to think. They advise me to spend some time just staring into empty space or painting. "Do nothing!" they say. I mow the lawn, clean the house, cook and iron, if I am not working. Sunbathing I go through my texts; driving the car I sing with the radio; in airports I correct articles, in trains I write. "You exaggerate!" There is so much to do and so much that never gets done. It is the illness of our times - everything moves faster and faster, giving us more and more to do.

Sometimes I go for a walk. Then I look around at the view, at flowers, at mountains, at trees or at the streets, buildings and shops if I am in town. I listen to what my friends have to say. I observe people; I try to understand what language they speak and who they are. I imagine their stories and sometimes I tell these stories. I look at the sea coming and going, at all the people on the beach. They look like ants. "The sunglasses I bought in Mexico with US

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dollars are made in Mauritius - what a world!" The warmth of Brazil, Mexico, Cuba, Peru, Bali, Chile also help me get up. Once the day has started there is no way of stopping it.

HAPPINESS

I am really happy when working alone in the rehearsal room. This usually happens during holidays, in the period when a new performance is beginning to take shape. The theatre is empty, so I can remain as long as I like in the room and make whatever noise comes to me with the freedom of knowing that no-one will hear me. I start singing, making up costumes, playing with props and inventing sequences of actions. The happiness comes from that time when nothing has to make sense, or be believable and effective, and still meanings and stories pop up and down in my mind and in and out of the space. I really enjoy the solitude of research, of being at the beginning of a process that still doesn't care for results, when the other way of thinking that I have learnt as an actress is being fully used.

But it is not easy to continue being an actress. Acting needs a particular quality of time. Physical and vocal actions need to be incorporated to such a point that they can think for themselves. The daily rituals of preparing props and costumes for performances fill hours. My mind and body have to be regularly prepared, fed and rested in order to be totally present on stage.

I no longer feel the absolute need to be confronted with spectators that would help maintain my priorities clearly. After years of experience the natural tendency is to start directing.

Younger generations of performers demand to be looked at, guided, corrected; and they have lots of energy to waste! I have passed the years which are generally considered as those of the flower of youth.

Costumes I have worn for decades start getting tight as extra kilos accumulate around my torso. I no longer feel "attractive" in the banal sense of the word. I could solve this by hiding behind technique or continuing to sit in the director's chair, but the real problem is the effort of finding the necessary energy to perform every evening. This effort keeps on getting bigger.

On the days when I feel grey, when I want to stop and rest so that younger generations can take over, I need to recognise what it is essential for me to protect. I could retire into the tacit world of the actor. Like other actors before me, I could refuse to explain the non-explicable and give up attempting to make a connection with the world of history and theory. Following the example of other actors, I could rest before performing, ignore problems that do not concern acting and only fill the professional space that I am supposed to occupy. I could let others write and talk about my work. I could let others decide the context within which I should operate. I could avoid giving lectures at universities, feeling like a fish climbing mountains. I could stop editing *The Open Page*, stop pretending I know how to write English just as well as I know how to compose a way of walking. I could give up organising projects, tours, festivals and workshops. I could close myself into the rehearsal space and be happy. But I don't.

THE CASTLE OF SCILLA

For many years every June I have taken part in a session of the University of Eurasian Theatre in the south of Italy, organised by Teatro Proskenion and directed by Eugenio Barba. After various attempts at fusing the practical and theoretical research and teaching, the hours of work are now generally arranged in a similar way every year. I lead the practical work in the mornings, four university professors give lectures in the

afternoons and Eugenio Barba takes over the evenings with demonstrations and talks in response to themes which have emerged during the day. While I work practically, Eugenio gathers the university professors to discuss; these meetings are the interval of freedom which give him the motivation to then work in public.

The fifty participants sweat for four hours and then sit with their notebooks for the rest of the day. I could finish my exertions after dealing with fifty hungry and demanding students in the morning and then rest without attending the lectures in the afternoons. But I don't - partly because the talks are interesting and partly because I still try to keep alive the old connection between the practical and theoretical work.

After lunch I climb the hill to the castle of Scilla where the University takes place and I listen to what the professors have to

say. If I were not present, my voice would not be heard in the interventions I make. Once again, as an actor I would be confined to the privileged and tacit world of actions. I would not be able to catch details in the way of thinking which allow me to balance on the line of tension strung between my experience and the historians' perception of theatre practice.

CREATIVE FRUSTRATIONS

I have often spoken about my frustration in not hearing the name of a woman among those who have influenced the theatre history of the 20th century. I am endlessly confronted with the names of Stanislavski, Artaud, Copeau, Meyerhold, Brecht and Grotowski. My dissatisfaction forces me to act by sharing my need with other women so that together we can invent a way of documenting and narrating that reflects our point



The castle of Scilla, Italy. Photo: Proskenion

of view as women theatre practitioners.

I am aware that we cannot just complain because we are not represented and we cannot expect that this space will be given to us for nothing. In order to discover a way of being present in theatre history, we have to make a triple effort. We have to continue living and creating theatre, we have to discover a way of observing our lives and our work, and we have to feed the enthusiasm that says that this impossibility is possible. It is a much harder task than for those who know how to document and make theory already, following the rules that have been established for centuries.

But lately I have been bothered by another frustration. I am part of a theatre group, Odin Teatret, led by a well-known and resolute director, Eugenio Barba, who talks, writes and directs in a way that is influential with the people who populate our little international world of group theatre. Although boosting and stimulating the individual personality of all its members is at the base of Odin Teatret's existence and longevity, I sometimes feel that I disappear within the group. Unless we are operating in circumstances that are separate from the group, it is usually the director's name that is remembered. Even amongst so-called feminist circles, quotes will mostly refer to Eugenio's texts - a natural consequence of his commitment to leaving a testimony.

My frustration does not derive from not hearing my name, but from the general automatism which tends to recognise those who have put down their thoughts and interpretations of reality in writing forgetting those who, by preference, express themselves through actions. The same automatism produces a tendency in women theatre practitioners to use quotes that say cleverly what they want to express rather than searching for their own words. It is this automatism that I am concerned with and that I aim to

break down, in myself as well as others.

It would be easier for me to let Eugenio talk, explain, write and give lectures. Not only do I agree with most of what he says and recognise his greater experience, but it is also one of his responsibilities. Being a director, once the performance is on the road, he concentrates on where to place the performance, he takes care of the relationships with the theatre's friends, he reads as his form of training and he carefully evaluates what we have created together. The actors keep on "doing" on stage every day at home or on tour, in the same way as during rehearsals.

But my commitment to the Magdalena Project and *The Open Page* have not allowed me to let others speak for me. I have had to start talking, and in so doing, I am discovering my own way of describing, commenting, analysing and passing on experience. My struggle is slowly to let people know that I exist as a *non-tacit* actress as well as being dedicated to what is called tacit knowledge. To achieve this, I know I have to do everything that I need to do in order to continue being an actress, and much more besides.

CUBA

In a meeting on group theatre at the Teatro Escambray in the province of Santa Clara in Cuba, holding back tears, Antonia Fernandez talked of her need to exist in the first person, as a kind of virus invading the hard disk. After working for twenty years with Teatro Buendía, whilst still referring to this group as her professional family and home, Antonia decided to leave and start her own group in order to direct. The general interpretation of this decision would point towards egocentricity or not being able to have *due galli nel pollaio* (an Italian saying meaning that you cannot have two cocks in a chicken yard).

Teatro Buendía is directed by a woman



Julia Varley directing an improvised vocal chorus.
Photo: Proskenion

of great experience, Flora Lauten, recognised as a master by many of the younger generation of Cuban theatre practitioners. Flora believes that their experience shows that it is not feasible to have two directors with only one rehearsal room and the same group of actors available.

I am not convinced that the explanation of Antonia's choice is as simple as it seems at first. I do not think that it is a question of a "cockerel competition", but rather the complex result of a struggle to create a different kind of presence as an actress, with a greater involvement in sharing the responsibility for the consequences of our craft.

During my spoken intervention at the same meeting, I organised an improvised vocal concert. I asked everyone present to stand up and let their voices follow what I did with my hands, simply reacting to my movements. The experiment was successful and everyone was surprised that such a simple instruction could produce a result. Afterwards I repeated the movements alone without the vocal response of the people in front of me. Of course I looked as if I had gone mad. By doing this I wanted to demonstrate that sense is given by relationship - in this case the relationship between my hands

and their voices. I wanted to dispute the opinion I had heard that Teatro Estudio (an important Cuban theatre group of the 1970s) is Vicente Revuelta (the founder of the group). I wanted to point out the importance of the relationship in giving meaning to an experience.

One day Antonia asked me for a practical task to work on with a view to creating a performance. "I want to continue being an actress," she said, with an earnest hunger in her eyes. I interpreted her wish as the need to continue learning from the actor's embodied experience in order to direct her new group in the best possible way. The natural centrifugal tendency of an old group, which pushes the lonely leader towards new young adepts and the older members with strong personalities and initiative to become loners, is what had determined her choice, but she did not want to lose anything in the process. The question remained of how to continue being an actress and do everything else as well. The answer, I feel, is to be found somewhere in the word "relationship".

THE TOBACCO FACTORY

During the meeting in Cuba, one morning we were taken to a tobacco factory. It was a big room with about two hundred workers, mostly women, sitting in rows at old wooden tables all facing the same direction like at school. They made the famous Cuban cigars for exportation. I call it a factory because there were many people working together, but it had no modern aspect and there were no machines in sight.

Teatro Escambray presented a dramatic reading on the life of José Martí, in the traditional style that establishes that twice a day someone reads a story to the workers. I had difficulty in following the performance as my attention was totally captured by the women working.

On each of their tables were piles of

tobacco leaves and two wooden blocks carved with a line of holes in the shape of half cigars. Each table had a top shelf, and on some of them were bundles of completed cigars tied with a ribbon. The women worked at different rhythms and were at different phases in the making of their cigars. Each worker went through the whole process of producing cigars, sitting on their individual chairs on top of which some had put cushions. Some of the tables had pictures stuck to them.

Gradually I understood the order of the work. First the workers took a bundle of bigger tobacco leaves and folded them, then cut a longer leaf into a special moon shape using a small sharp piece of metal and rolled the leaf around the other folded leaves. Then they cut away the disorderly ends. Some scraps would land on the floor as the women quickly wiped their tables with their forearms; other scraps would end up in a container placed behind each person's chair. What began to look like a cigar would be put into one of the holes of their boxes. When all the holes were occupied, the women put the lid on and placed the box under pressure. Many boxes were piled on top of each other under a weight then tightened by a press. The women left their chairs, opened the press, turned some of the boxes upside down, put new boxes in, operated the wheel that closed the press again and returned to their places with another box filled with pressed cigars. They obviously recognised their own boxes, although I could not figure out how. They turned the cigars round and put them back under the press. Finally they chose some special leaves, which to me seemed to be more elastic and wet, to finish the cigars, rolling them around one of the ends to make a closed tip. Sometimes the cigar was put in the mouth to make this finishing touch easier. Then the cigars were put in a bundle and tied with a piece of wide

string that had been distributed beforehand by another woman, who seemed to be a kind of head of department because of her stern expression.

The women were mostly dressed in shorts and sleeveless T-shirts. It was hot. The room was open on two sides looking out on the street, but the big ventilators on the ceiling did not move. The women were of all ages and shades of skin colour; some had red or blond hair, some had green or blue eyes. Many of them were good-looking and had curious and lively faces. The presence of foreigners and of an actress who had been on television probably enhanced their animation. At times they chatted with their neighbours, at times they listened to the story, looked up and smiled, at times they seemed lost in their thoughts. They never stopped working. Their hands knew exactly what to do. Some of them had young apprentices sitting behind them who learned by watching.

One woman came with a metal cup of coffee, which was passed down a row of workers. Everyone took just one sip. They willingly answered questions. Some of them worked from six in the morning. They earned a certain amount extra for each cigar they produced. Some of them had worked in the same factory for thirty years.

As I looked at them in this room that was like a melting inferno smelling of tobacco, admiring their *real* work - a repetitive action with no personal meaning except earning money - I wondered about their lives. "We are *guajiro*, peasants from the province," they told me. Most of them had never even travelled to the capital, La Havana. They worked to make a living; fell in love, got married, had children, and worked to maintain their families. Participating in local politics could be a way of making living conditions better, while the big world was what was seen on television.

I must never, *never* forget how privileged I am, with my opportunities for travel, for organising my own schedule and having an enormous variation in my activities. I am personally responsible for the outcome of much of what I do. I can have a strong influence on the direction of the theatre group I am part of. I learn and enjoy myself while finding ways to overcome the everyday constraints put on artistic and cultural work in our modern society. I *choose* to work hard, because the work gives me a meaning. With a smile I accepted one cigar as a gift to remind me of this if I fall into the trap of complaining about having too much to do.

PRESENCE

Theatre is my way of establishing relationships. Being an actress has taught me that impossible combinations can come true, that the simultaneous presence on stage of the person, the actor and the character is magic and that expression comes despite the desire to express. The embodied way of thinking that I have acquired through my craft contains opposites and paradoxes; it is quick, intuitive and particularly apt for a woman. It does not require explanations, but demands an ability to move in different directions at the same time. It involves all levels of experience, from personal to political, from emotional to rational, from ethereal to sensorial. Acting technique is not based on fixed rules, but on principles that flow like the water of a river contained by mutating banks.

For me, as an actress, to talk of presence is to use a technical term where visibility is not necessarily connected to materiality or invisibility to spirituality. The energy and motivation, which guide the actions that the spectators see, are extremely concrete for me. They constitute the breathing of my body cells. I am aware that I intend to provoke a different interpretation of my

actions in each spectator and that I aim to share an experience rather than represent something. Theatre teaches me every day to rely on personal truths and not on objective rights or wrongs.

Most of what I know is based on my experience as an actress. I need to continue being an actress in order to find the way to realise my other ambitions in a manner that will not repeat an already established order that I disagree with. I want to base my interest in women's presence in theatre history on the experience of presence on stage. I believe that those who are familiar with this different way of thinking have a serious responsibility to indicate new values and help change what needs to be changed in the world we live in.

One of the biggest lessons acting has given me is to trust in the power of vulnerability. This allows me to underline difference rather than try to reach a dominant position. Accepting the positive value of vulnerability and humanity can be of great help to women who want to create a space where even men can cry or think in an intuitive way in connection with what their bodies tell them.

A WEDDING

I got very angry once. I was at a friend's wedding. After the ceremony, all the guests drove to a restaurant out of town. At a certain point I realised that the bride was sitting outside alone with her family, while I was talking to a group of women. Most of the men seemed to have disappeared. I realised that they were inside having a meeting. They were taking advantage of the fact that the local mayor was present together with some influential theatre celebrities to resolve some economic difficulties and protect the existence of a research centre. The groom - my friend - was amongst them, totally involved in the discussion and unaware of his bride and guests. Although I



Julia Varley and Mr. Peanut at the sea. Photo: Proskenion

recognised the importance of the research centre the men were talking about, I refused to accept that a wedding - perhaps one of the most important days in the bride's life - should be transformed into a public meeting, abandoning the bride to herself. I had difficulty in understanding the self-centredness of the men who put someone's work so high on the ladder of importance that they totally forgot to take other people into consideration. I angrily said what I thought and went to sit in the car. The men looked at me as if I was not able to understand the situation. They just could not grasp that personal life could have priority over work and the making of theatre history. I realised that as a woman I thought differently and had another way of prioritising.

My mother often reminds me of the saying that behind great men one finds great women. Of course official recognition can be useful, but I would prefer to be aiming at a different kind of visibility, which I feel still has to be invented. My protest is in order to achieve a paradoxical dream: a world in which anonymous people have a face and a voice. I wonder if instead of wanting to reach a position of power as women, we should not turn the usual values upside down to stress the importance of assisting, nurturing, organising, translating, inspiring, feeling and taking care of a family, instead of being preoccupied by being accepted in a world and a history that do not belong to us. Again it is the collective work as editors of *The Open Page* and the connection created

by the Magdalena Project network which is teaching me how to deal with the contradictory needs of being tacit and articulate, invisible and present.

The word "relationship" comes back to me, as I realise that often the service women provide is because they find more satisfaction in participating in a common project than standing out on top of others. If I aim for a world where generosity and altruism can exist, why should I be ashamed of helping women and men I care for as well as helping myself? Because people say that men take advantage and deny women's ability to decide? Surely I can do without the work it takes to climb vertical power structures while struggling to establish the right to be recognised for my own authority? Surely I can find a way of taking my life into my hands without denying myself the pleasure and sense of adventure that collaborating with others - including men - implies? Surely I am able to protect my different needs and ways of perceiving? As a woman, should I stop being what I am in order to change the world or should I try to change the world so that a woman's way of being can be valued?

LITTLE RASCALS

When I was a child I used to enjoy climbing up hills and singing to those below "I am the king of the castle and you're the little rascal". At the same time I was convinced it was much more fun being the rascal. Kings just stood there sing-songing and doing nothing, the rascals could run about busily.

I dedicated the fourth Transit Festival to Maria Alekseevna Valentei, Meyerhold's granddaughter, a woman who devoted her life to recovering her grandfather's memory and legacy, confronting the Soviet government in doing so. I expect somebody will ask me why I would dedicate a women's theatre festival to someone who has dedicated her life to a man's work. The impulse came from

hearing of her death, after having met her in Moscow. Everyone will remember Meyerhold, but who will remember Maria, or Masha as she was called?

If I can do something to help the faces and names of all those anonymous women who work hard behind the limelight of theatre history be seen and heard, I feel I should do it. I would like to discover theoretical authority in their letters, biographies and autobiographies. I would like to turn upside down the meaning given to tacit assistance making it a creative collaboration of women who value relationship more than their egos. I would like to help these women recognise their voice in the first person without having to give up their characteristic generosity.

While directing Ana Woolf's performance *Seeds of Memory*, the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo taught me how to challenge the absence of the *desaparecidos*, whose presence had to be recreated, remembering the everyday details of what they were when they were alive, smiling and full of hope for the future. No political discourse would give life and memory back to those young people, but the description of their small daily actions could. I remember this when I think of what I should say in a lecture or in the opening address to a festival. Official titles will not teach me to talk, but daily exercise and learning from mistakes can. Listening to others and concentrating on what is useful are my basic tools.

When I read through an issue of *The Open Page* I realise that few articles have an independent strength, but that each author participates in making something important because the texts in relation to one another create a loud and profoundly interesting voice. Presence is made up of a collective striving which is shared as the words connect in the mind of the reader.

I need to establish a relationship

between being an actress and my need to write, organise and direct, as well as balancing on the line of tension in between my work and the environment of professional scholars and historians. Then perhaps something will happen which will surprise and excite me, which will give me the energy to overcome my tiredness and refresh the motivation to maintain a daily discipline with the freedom of a rascal.

THE NEXT DAY

I started writing this article thinking of a personal confession. For once I wanted to answer my worried friends who ask me how I am. I thought of saying things I would not usually share because of a necessary sense of restraint.

My conclusion, I am afraid, is still the same: I will continue working three times as hard because I don't want to give up being an actress and I don't want to give up my struggle to become an actress who can also be present in a world of theory. I want to continue doing what makes me happy, what I think is my duty and what my theatre-relationship to the world demands.

I am committed to giving the best I can every day and to trying to maintain the quality that is essential to me. Although I do not have the time, although it is totally unnecessary, I will keep on making my bed with ironed sheets, so that I can sleep well at night and prepare for what the next day will bring.

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