



Celebrating the Essential

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Prologue

I am walking up the hill. It is steep and the Brazilian sun is burning hot. I look at the small palm trees that have recently been planted along the side of the road. In twenty or thirty years, people might climb up the hill in the shade. Or maybe they will use a rolling pavement that carries them without having to make any effort at all. Afterwards they will go to the gym to use up their calories. Or by then, maybe people will no longer need to eat, or exercise, and the time will have come when human beings will share thoughts without words, be driven by micro-chips and satellites, digest books with a pill, and ask the sunrise to make an immediate replay.

Surely the world will be different in the future. That is, if we are able to protect it enough so that there *will be* a future. Changes can be exciting, challenging, demanding, but I feel happy to have grown up in the past century and only be allowed to get a glimpse of the transformations that will occur.

I pass a row of teenagers sitting on a wall on the side of the road; they are all looking down at their mobile phones. I am curious and wonder if they are writing messages to each other or to others. A little further along a small restaurant shows a sign outside: “No WIFI, talk with each other!” I smile: even I need to learn to prioritise seeing my friends and family in flesh, rather than write letters to those who are on the other side of the world. Luckily theatre still demands that people share the same time and space physically. In an age of streaming and on-line performance, I still rely on the ancient technique of actor’s stage presence, on a language that communicates through the body. Any vision I can have of the future starts from a way of thinking that is rooted in my feet.

But even I no longer possess the luxury of being able to rehearse for months and give shape to a character over a couple of years as I used to. Communication has become so fast, and in the general rush I worry about becoming superficial. No one has time now. On Facebook, WhatsApp,

LinkedIn, Twitter, web pages, blogs: I like, I participate, I go, I don't go, I say how nice, I agree, I disagree, I say hello, and not much more. Sentences become shorter and shorter as do the words: C U! It seems to be important to be seen and recognised, rather than to say something with a meaning and a story. Not many have time to write, but most of all not many have time to read. The best hope is to express something so universal that it just needs a click to respond.

Wondering about what we have lost with the inevitable side effects of progress, I remember how the famous Peking Opera actress, Pei Yanling, had to stand with her leg on a table for an hour to stretch her muscles while her master stood beside her. My own apprenticeship – learning to think in physical actions to acquire a knowledge that is embodied and cannot be explained – lasted for years. But I realise that in the future it will be difficult for young people to have the privilege I experienced: the time, dedication, patience and freedom to train, learn and research endlessly. I imagine that education will have to follow a completely different rhythm and adapt to a reality that is changing at a speed that provokes both fear and amazement in me.

In my vision of the future, I would like to be rich in time, to have unhurried hours to read and think, go for walks and look at the view. Perhaps I am being optimistic. I find I am eternally running after myself, never reaching my own shadow. But if I stop a moment, I remember that this is my own choice. Even though the material conditions are harder and there is less funding available for culture, and we have to stretch our energies to earn a living and keep our theatre group going, we are still living the life we have chosen.

Travelling along the winding mountainous roads in Laos some months ago, I looked at the peasants who were waiting for the rain to prepare their terraced rice fields. Some had a small motor plough, but mostly they rely on buffaloes. In a village I visited a school where the teacher carried her baby on her back as she imparted her lessons. Some families have twelve children, she told me, and they cannot finance everyone's studies. I looked into the classrooms and compared the wooden tables on a cement floor with the modern computers of Danish schools. Tourism is the main source of income in this country, which has the largest number of dropped bombs per inhabitant. The cluster bombs secretly

dropped by the Americans during the Vietnam war still make victims of children playing, peasants working, and those trading metal for a living. The few rich belong to families who used to trade opium. I see very few lorries along the main road of the country, but the markets sell the same plastic shoes and nylon clothes as the rest of the world. Life is hard and the aspirations simple: every family wants its children to learn English, get a job in tourism or with the government.

Confronted with the harshness and simplicity of reality for the friendly Lao people who smiled curiously at me, I wondered about the meaning of life. They concentrate on earning enough money to send their children to better schools, in the hope that they would have an easier existence than their own. What more? I thought of my three-year-old niece who could turn on a video without anyone having taught her, and my own strong feeling that experience is mostly passed on through the air without knowing where it comes from. Will what I have done live on in others? Will something remain of my actions? Is this the meaning I pursue? It is certainly a hope that drives me on to build my future.

The father of a friend of mine died recently. After my friend had sold his remaining furniture and belongings, she asked herself if that is all a whole life is worth; does it all add up to just a few pounds? Trying to comfort her from a distance, I wrote a few futile words to soothe her pain: "The meaning of life is only to keep itself alive; we theatre people keep alive through our work, our performances, the relationships we establish with spectators and colleagues, and with those who learn from our practice; our life lives on in the air that surrounds us; and I am sure your Dad lives on in you, in your daughters, in his friends, in whatever he has done. Maybe what he was is not recognised by name, but it lives on, as all experience does".

Imagining how what I do today in my theatre work will live on tomorrow, or how the idea of the future influences the choices I make in the present, three immediate questions come to me immediately: how I react to what I experience as a worldwide war against women; how I deal with the heritage of Odin Teatret, the theatre group to which I belong; and how I can contribute in the best possible way to our new performance *The Tree* that will be presented for the first time in September 2016. I have many other plans and projects, including different books I would like to publish, performances I have to finish directing, and a work demonstration

I have had in mind for some years. Will life ever give me enough time for it all? Certainly not, especially if I also try to look after my garden and iron my sheets as I have always done. This article gives me the opportunity to concentrate on the three main questions regarding my vision of the future.

The Hummingbird

I was travelling in Burma. A guide had recommended that I visit a temple and, on my way back, I was walking along a river in the shade of some trees. From the dusty path I was following, I saw a small child playing on the riverbank. He was alone. He must have been two or three years old. He seemed satisfied and happy, immersed in his activity with some small sticks that were perhaps a small boat with passengers, or a fishing rod and a catch of carps, or a saucepan and a bowl of food to sell at the market. The river water was deep and flowed clear. The child was so absorbed by his game that he did not realise I was looking at him. He was autonomous and confident. I thought: this is no longer possible in Europe.

Not long before, I had read about a mother who was arrested in New York for having left her child alone in a park to play. In the West, not to supervise has become a crime. How habits have changed since my childhood, when my brothers and I often remained alone at home in the evening. In Danish schools, children now become accustomed year after year to being more and more protected from commitment, fatigue, sweat and risk. The concerned teachers increasingly contain their curiosity, which finds expression only in electronic games. Children must pause from all physical exertion to drink water, have a snack and rest. Forty minutes of attention are the most you can ask from them.

During my walk in Burma, I saw no adult in the vicinity of the little boy. Had he fallen into the water, he would probably have swum contentedly, as my brother did when he learned to swim before he could walk. What struck me was the beauty of the child. He was beautiful because he was satisfied, independent, intent. The river was his playground, not a threat. The adults who were walking on the path were not potential enemies, but passers-by, villagers or foreigners. For him, the world was a universe to explore and the future a mine of opportunity. I thought: even stifling protection is a form of violence and the cause of this violence is love.

How many women suffer from violence that springs from the love of their partners? Too many. How many women are reduced to objects that elicit no empathy? From the news I read, their number is increasing continuously. Perhaps this has always been so, and it is only the speed of today's global information that slaps this tragic reality into our faces every day. I often wonder where this violence comes from; violence similar to that caused by the extreme conviction of ideologies or religions, by injustice and extreme poverty, by nationalism. When I read of fathers and mothers who kill their daughters, of brothers who kill their sisters, of husbands who kill their wives, I clash with behaviours that are as incomprehensible to me as those that seem to direct the course of history.

A few years ago, I saw an Egyptian film in which a son, who had grown up in a loving relationship with his widowed mother, eventually killed her. The boy had become Islamist during his studies and could not stand the idea of his mother going by herself to visit one of his professors. In the small dark cinema in Paris, I cried for a long time at the end of the film. I had suddenly been overwhelmed by the evidence that more than half of the women in the planet experience similar tragedies and that I was totally powerless to confront this reality. In addition, today I feel the sadness of knowing that in some countries the rights that have been achieved are being eroded.

Other women I work with are often overcome by the same kind of distress. To them I say: the only way to fight is to do our job well. Which is to say to dedicate ourselves with commitment and attention to detail to what we know how to do: theatre. Our expertise and our tacit knowledge – the body and senses that think as a whole entity with the mind – have an obligation to intervene and demonstrate a different way of perceiving reality. As women working in theatre we have learned to act simultaneously in different directions, and it is our responsibility to use this skill to voice our dissent and rebellion. We need to create space for poetry, independence, empathy, subjectivity, solidarity and beauty. The effect of our small actions gives us hope in being able to influence social reality and in opening horizons for a vulnerable humanity. The relationship with the spectators fills what we do with meaning. It is a hope without illusions, but it gives us the strength to go on while around us the world seems to become more and more insane.

As a director, one of the small actions that result from such worries engaged me in the creation of *Anónimas* (Anonymous Women), with Mexican/Colombian actress Amaranta Osorio and Spanish guitarist Teresa García. One of the starting points for the creation of the performance was the numerous feminicides on the border between Mexico and the United States. The silenced voices of the young women who had disappeared in the desert was the theme for the first improvisation. Now that the performance is finished, the sound of Amaranta's soiled white dress dragging on the chequered floor, as she slowly walks to the accompaniment of the whispering guitar, makes me think of a message carried by the wind. It is a light breeze that moves between the dunes and the stones and that carries the voices of women who would like to talk to reveal horrors and names of perpetrators. But silence reigns instead. Amaranta walks and places small female figures on the floor; some of them are Virgin Marys of different colours. In short sentences, Amaranta reveals the destinies of a few women through their stories; including that of a rich girl, who grew up in a family that spoiled her, where she felt safe, until *that* day. The text does not reveal exactly what happened. The accounts of so many raped or abused women are an everyday matter; not much imagination is needed in order to understand what is left unsaid.

Femicide is a relatively recent term; it denotes the murder of women just for being women. This type of murder is certainly not unfamiliar, but the feeling of a pervasive attack on women in so many parts of the world is new to me. Earlier women were anonymous in history because they had no voice or face, because they were unrecognised, because they were confined to the world of children, home, convent, kitchen and ornamentation. Today I feel that women are also anonymous because they have become figures, numbers, statistics. With *Anónimas*, I would like to help give a name and a face to simple and unrecognised women, such as our mothers and grandmothers also are. We walk on the shoulders of our ancestors, especially those suffragettes and feminists who fought for the rights that ought to be guaranteed today. In the performance's final image, the younger sister, a doll, exits standing on the shoulders of her older sister, while the third sister finishes playing her guitar concert in front of a tiny audience of photographs of the young women silenced by history.

At a certain point of *Anónimas*, actress Amaranta Osorio, says: “Women have tipped the established balance; some men respond with violence; and we, how do we respond?” Female revenge is a theme that has been present in many of the recent meetings of The Magdalena Project, the international network of women in theatre in which I have actively participated since 1986; it was also a theme addressed by Jill Greenhalgh, the founder of the network, in her performance project *Vigia – The Acts*. For example, during the Transit 7 Festival, held at Odin Teatret in Denmark in 2012, a video was shown about *Femen*, the protest movement started in Ukraine by some women who then moved to Paris, known particularly for their bare-breasted public demonstrations. This happened in the same period as the arrest of the Pussy Riots for blasphemy for playing, wearing hoods, in a Moscow cathedral. In the video you witness anger made manifest with violence and courage, but also in ways that shocked me because of their aggression and vehemence. When these women pull down the large crucifix in the centre of Kiev with a chain saw, or are preparing to confront the police physically, or challenge hundreds of protesters against abortion, or undress in front of known politicians, they show a deep, irreverent conviction which is disconcerting, at least for me.

The Transit 7 Festival, with its theme of *Risk, Crisis and Invention*, was dedicated to Erica Ferrazza, an actress with the Italian group MetaArte, who was murdered by her husband. I wanted to underline the fact that our artistic theatre environments are not immune to this kind of problem. From the opening of the Festival we were confronted with the theme of violence, not just that suffered by women, but also violence used by women in response to abuse. Taking a risk – abandoning a convenient position of balance – to go into crisis – not knowing how move on and being in a position of stalemate – requires invention – to devise a perspective. How to go on without abandoning anger and without getting trapped in a way of thinking and values that are not ours? The discussions were animated, and younger women especially were impatient with the more peaceful, philosophical and tolerant solutions of the first generations of feminism and of those of us who already had considerable theatre experience. How should we, how can we respond? This question, which I ask the spectators of *Anónimas*, after telling the tale of Bluebeard and of the women whom he keeps locked up after killing them, still remains unanswered for me.



Feminist struggles, from the first suffragette demonstrations to the more recent marches in support of divorce and free abortion, the movements against child marriage, the acquisition of the vote, the attainment of equal opportunities and wages, the autonomy that women pursue day after day, have social consequences that go beyond the claims and slogans. In general, as women become emancipated, men are losing their traditional role of *padre/padrone* (father/master/owner), he who protects and provides for the family, builds a shelter and brings money home. The sense of identity – for both women and men – is in constant evolution. In theatre also the number of female directors is increasing, as women accept the responsibility of speaking in the first person. In this era of change, women have the strength of conviction of those who look towards innovation, of those who are discovering their own strength and language, of those who are articulating the possibility of a different value system, of those who think optimistically of positive developments, of those who defend life. I have also noticed this phenomenon as the years pass in theatre in general, and in my group – Odin Teatret – and The Magdalena Project in particular: women cultivate their motivation and workload with more commitment, conviction and continuity. In contrast many men are left with a feeling of deprivation and decline. In this crisis of social identity some men are struggling to find alternatives; others are overwhelmed by frustration and resort to violence; some assert their strength in the proliferation of war; others seek shelter in ideology and religion as, unfortunately, do too many of the women who are at their service. The crisis of traditional values, the priority given to commercial business, the failure of political organisations to provide credible visions, corruption, and the confusion that reigns everywhere in the media ruled democratic processes, all these push towards exaggerated and extreme certainties. Everyone needs to believe in something; I try to believe every day in the prospects opened by my theatre work.

As women, we have rightly tipped the balance, breaking the existing domination of the patriarchy, but it is not obvious how to establish a new harmony in which everyone can find an autonomous role and therefore their own beauty. Perhaps theatre – where opposition and conflict are a source of creativity and essential to the drama; where the body, images and senses are necessary to the complexity of perception and interpretation – is

a terrain where we can invent and experiment with other points of view. It is said that wars serve governments by reinforcing a sense of national identity and resolving internal divisions. In today's general crisis it seems to me that a war has been declared on women, turning them into the enemy. In the performance with Amaranta and Teresa we also remember all the anonymous threats, letters, complaints, phone calls, bullets and graves, as well as the actual women. In this context, women are not just anonymous figures or ancestors, but, as the foe, they once again become witches, temptresses, prostitutes, those passionate, sensual and irrational beings capable of communicating with the forces of nature who do not respect established power and order and who dishonour the tribe: individuals to be eliminated and burnt at the stake as in the Middle Ages. Or they become objects to be used as cannon fodder in the wars of others.

In rehearsing *Anónimas*, I knew that I could not present violence and horror directly. Showing brutality realistically does not work, because theatre does not have the same impact as the cruelty of history. I wanted the performance to move and touch some individuals among the spectators through the poetry of images, the beauty of the two women on stage and the softness of the classical guitar. One solution was to present a different profile of anonymity through the biographies of the actresses' mothers and grandmothers, women recognised as important only within the context of their families and personal relationships. Every one of their true stories is incredible: women who survive war, migrate, abandon unwanted children and arranged marriages, work, sew clothes, sing and tell fairy-tales, cook delicious meals, and feel like a mighty army when they gather their family around them. Another solution was to build on the veiled strength of the women on stage. Behind their smiles, sweetness and innocence, behind the whispers in which they communicate, the spectators should perceive their danger, decision and courage.

As director I allow the actresses' despair and impatience at the subject matter to explode in only one scene, that we call the scene of madness. I give vent to the anguish and powerlessness that I experienced in the cinema in Paris with senseless, disorderly and unseemly actions. They are the reaction to the announcement in the performance of the murder of the activist and poet Susana Chávez. I was in Cuba, at the Magdalena sin Fronteras Festival, organised by Roxana Pineda in 2011, when I first heard

this news. The women's festival became enveloped in sadness and anger that we had to transform immediately into the need to make our voices heard through our performances. Susana Chávez lived in northern Mexico on the border with the United States and had invented the slogan "Not another dead woman" to rebel against the fate of the many young women being killed in her region. Before murdering her, they cut off her hand.

Particular experiences have guided me when taking up themes that evoke pain and violence in theatre, while pursuing stage truth of simple presence, avoiding exaggerated acting and wanting to present beauty and wonder even amid horror. Beauty can be a weapon, as is what is delicate, small and insignificant. It is a political choice: we can only rely on the personal, on what each of us knows from direct experience, in order to reject the power imposed from above in a vertical hierarchy and conquer authority for ourselves through action and the sharing of a horizontal structure. We will never have the expediency of those in power. We choose to build our path from the margins. There, on the periphery, we find our centre and we are on the side of those who suffer injustice. In this risky position, out of balance, I must always remember what I have inherited.

At the Festival Magdalena sin Fronteras in 2014, Roxana Pineda asked those of us who were going to lead a workshop to take as its theme the story of Obba. In the religious Yoruba tradition of African origin, Obba is the wife of Xangô, the god of law and thunder. Obba sacrifices herself for her husband to the point of cutting off her ears for him to eat when the food has run out. When Xangô discovers Obba's mutilation, he flees and abandons her. Without ears, she is no longer beautiful as she was before. The story was elaborated in different ways in the workshops, in search of women's centrality. Despite the sacrifice? Or because of the sacrifice? Does the choice to devote oneself to the loved person – or family – and to renounce one's own good for that of others have of necessity to be dictated by a senseless deprivation? Or can it be the result of an autonomous choice based on a different priorities and values from the norm? When does generosity become sacrifice with all the connotations of religious suffering? And when is it instead a human quality that can be proposed as an alternative to the materialism in which we have grown up in the West? Generosity is the quality I appreciate most in actors, when they have

learned to structure their energies and forget themselves, engaging instead in what the performance tells the spectator.

The problem arises when the woman who achieves her own ideals through sacrifice is ready to accept one blow after another in the hope that eventually she will manage to redeem, save and change the man beside her. I have met a few independent, strong, responsible, intellectually capable and elegant women with established careers, who have accepted their partner's violence for years. Each time they hide the bruises on their bodies and their psychological wounds in the belief that it will not happen again, that they will be able to bring about a change through love. Some only become aware of their situation at the moment of risking their lives, others do not save themselves in time. In every city in Denmark there are shelters for women who suffer violence. They are called Krisecenter (Crisis Centre). They have secret addresses to prevent husbands, fathers, brothers from finding the women who take refuge there with their children.

Even in Denmark the culture of sacrifice generates violence. Behaviour based on rivalry and power, on physical force and abuse, creates the scenario in which crimes are committed. The female tendency to prioritise family and love relationships over work, their willingness to follow a man and the impositions of his career as if they didn't have a separate identity, the loneliness of those who do not find a true companion, are seen as a weakness. The step from being weak to becoming a victim is short. But in this scenario, how can women defend their altruism, without consequently being considered losers and therefore lacking self-esteem and authority? How can we fight against the behaviour which also makes women establish their place in schools by becoming bullies, or stealing from a man they have drugged and then burn him in a car while he screams, or becoming suicide bombers who join Islamic State, killing innocents in the name of a law that forbids them to study, travel alone, earn money or drive?

At a certain point in *Anónimas*, Amaranta replaces the small female figures with stones. At the beginning she does this one by one; then the gravel starts to slip from her hand to cover the floor: individual women with their destinies have become numbers and statistics, lifeless stones, weights to carry, sealed mouths. The stones are swept away, to the accompaniment of a protest song that commemorates the names of famous female poets, scientists, musicians, saints and warriors from the past along

with the names of the actresses, their mothers and grandmothers. The small Virgin figures reappear in the performance during a dance. Amaranta places them on a chessboard of white and red squares as pawns ready to play, then in the position of a manoeuvring army, and at the end she gathers them into a compact group. Unity is strength: leave the role of victim to Christ and let's choose other images to identify with. The small Virgins in *Anónimas* are not there as a religious reference, but suggest the beauty, resistance, generosity and spirituality of women.

During a meeting at the Magdalena a Solas Festival, organised by Amaranta Osorio in Madrid in 2013, I talked about the little boy I had seen in Burma. I wanted to give an example of beauty, but most of all reawaken our responsibility as women of theatre to recreate and protect the freedom to take risks, where everything changes, moves, transforms, without losing what we have fought for – men and women – from the right to education and work to social security. I was thinking about how future generations grow up in the West and how their lack of perspective and ideals frightens me. So, during the meeting, I shared other stories as we sat in a circle.

A theatre group had prepared a performance for children in England. They were supposed to enter a labyrinth along a path where the scenes took place. Because of the child protection rules that exist against paedophilia, the actors were not allowed to be alone with the children in the labyrinth they had created, thus depriving the children of the experience of conquering the fear of the unknown and having an adventure. The children of western civilisations grow up thinking that all adults are potential criminals and that any display of physical affection is suspicious. And on top of this, despite all the rules, paedophilia is not prevented. I remember that my parents also instructed me not to talk to strangers, but nevertheless I did not grow up without faith in the human beings around me. No law prevented me from experiencing mystery and danger as something fascinating.

How can we create a world in which there is hope for the future, a sense of opportunity and discovery, even though it is not easy to achieve; a world full of challenges from which we can learn and develop as I saw in the absorption of the child on the river bank? The beauty of autonomy, of one's own meaning, is a journey that I still recognise as possible. The insecurity,

frustration, insoluble conflicts and useless sacrifice of a world based on commercial values assault us from the early years of childhood. The old values of the patriarchal family have rightly been rejected, but what values are we building in their place, now that the collective hippy communities have failed, as well as the associated politics and struggle for a more just society. What direction should we follow in search of an alternative?

During the same meeting at the Magdalena a Solas Festival in Madrid, Itziar Pascual, a Spanish scholar, answered my concerns with this story that she had heard during a trip to Africa:

A fire broke out in the jungle. All the animals gathered together did not know what to do. The flames were destroying the forest. A hummingbird flew to the river to collect a drop of water in its beak and returned to pour it on the fire. The animals laughed at the hummingbird's useless effort: 'Why do you fly all the way to the river; you will never manage to put out the fire'. The hummingbird kept on flying back and forth from the river to the fire, from the fire to the river, to collect drops of water in its beak. The animals laughed again. The hummingbird said: 'I do what I can and have to do: I try to put out the fire'.

I remember that the story ended there. Secretly I had asked myself if it wasn't possible for all the animals to collect water so that they could extinguish the fire, but this tempting illusion disappeared instantly as I felt as useless as the hummingbird in the face of history's cruelty and of the increasingly insane world. Then, re-reading my notes, I found that the story continues, giving a leading role to the little ones like the boy on the bank of the river:

Seeing the hummingbird, the baby elephant, which until then had remained sheltered between its mother's legs, dipped its trunk into the river and, after drawing as much water as possible, splashed it on a bush that was about to be devoured by fire. Also, a young pelican, having left its parents in the middle of the river, filled his big beak with water and flew off to drop a kind of waterfall on a tree threatened by the flames. Inspired by these examples, all the small animals strove together to put out the fire that by now had reached the banks of the river. Forgetting old grudges and age-old divisions, the lion cub and the baby antelope, monkey and leopard, eagle and white-necked hare fought side by side to stop the course of the fire. At that sight the adults ceased mocking them and, full of shame, began to help their little ones. With the arrival of fresh forces, when the shadows of the night descended on the savannah, the fire had been tamed. Dirty and tired, but safe, all the animals gathered to celebrate together the victory over the fire.

Yesterday they hanged a woman who had killed a man who had tried to rape her. Today a father stoned his daughter to death. Tomorrow war will continue. Yesterday, today and tomorrow a spectator will recognise her or his story in the performance *Anónimas* and thank the actresses for having told it. The performance is nothing more than one of those drops of water of the indefatigable hummingbird, one of the small actions of our making theatre in order to keep alive the hope of extinguishing the fire.

The Swing

Eugenio Barba has always been concerned about death and what he calls the last act of Odin Teatret, the theatre group that he founded in Norway in 1964, that moved to Denmark in 1966, and which I joined in 1976. Those of us who have been part of the group for fifty, forty or thirty years have signed a document in which we have agreed that Odin Teatret's name will be used only as long as one of us continues her or his theatre activities, in agreement with the others. Eventually Odin Teatret will disappear with us. Odin Teatret is not an institution or a building, it is the people who have worked together as a group throughout the years.

One day Eugenio explained our decision in an interview to the local paper of Holstebro, the town that has given us a home for fifty years. He gave the interview during the Festuge in 2011. Festuge in Danish means Festive Week. It is an event we have promoted and organised every two or three years since 1989 in Holstebro and the surrounding region. It lasts continuously for nine days and nights and is a gigantic social-cultural upheaval and ceremony involving all the institutions, organisations and associations of the town, schools, ethnic and religious minorities, the army, the police, the fire brigade, the shops, sport clubs: everyone!

The director of the newspaper and several readers reacted to the interview: why haven't Eugenio Barba and the actors of Odin Teatret nurtured a younger generation to take over? Why haven't they recognised that Holstebro needs Odin Teatret? Events like the Festuge must continue; they are an essential part of the town's life, of its cultural identity and specific social character.

These reactions were a turning point in our thinking about the future. I have never liked Eugenio's constant awareness of the end – of his own

death or that of one of the actors – and how that would change everything. I am convinced the future will always intervene in an unexpected way. However much we prepare, we will never be ready. We should learn from the classics and not forget King Lear. Rather than planning a finale, I prefer to concentrate my energy on today's activities and try to invent new projects and initiatives which can create the framework for the unforeseeable to happen. I prefer to dream actively of an everlasting tomorrow that demands the maximum of me in the present. I acknowledge my naivety, but I still prefer it to the temptation of a cynical realism that might ensnare me.

Odin Teatret has always felt gratitude towards the town of Holstebro and its inhabitants; those who created a cultural model in the 1960s. The impact of this cultural policy, that has been upheld for fifty years by Holstebro's politicians, was expressed in the newspaper readers' protest during the Festuge in 2011, demanding that Odin Teatret should secure a continuation of its work even when the group no longer exists. The letter told us that we need to show our gratitude to the town by preparing the future. We should find the means to nurture a younger generation who would agree to live and work artistically in a part of Denmark that is constantly losing residents and services. We cannot just abandon Holstebro because we no longer have the possibility to do everything ourselves.

We had never thought of our responsibility from this perspective. It was no longer a question of giving continuity to our group, our institution, our name, but that our policy, our way of thinking, of intervening, of creating relationships and exchange, should continue in other forms, with different people, other aesthetics and under other names. This helped me understand that I did not need to obstruct Eugenio's considerations for Odin Teatret's final scene, but rather propose ways in which we could encourage the contribution of the younger people around our group, in the hope that, in a faraway future, they might continue to work in Holstebro, following their own artistic needs and premises. I felt a new motivation to stimulate autonomous ideas and initiatives. I was aware that there was no guarantee of success because the motivation for accepting such an assignment and transforming it is in the hands of the receivers. But preparing a younger generation to continue a theatrical presence in their own way in our town was an active task that filled me with the desire to do

something, even to spend time nurturing other artists' projects that might end up in smoke.

The young performers, directors, groups would not be Odin Teatret's heirs. They would unfold their activities freely, and the more different they could be from us, the better. In their hearts, they might feel a strong tie to us, but it should not be too obvious in their work. Their assignment was to keep alive the network of collaborative bonds and cultural initiatives with the many milieus and subcultures in our community; but also to defend the space for international encounter, exchange and reciprocal interest which Holstebro politicians had been able to guarantee since 1966. This could all happen within the umbrella structure of the Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium, which we had developed over decades of work. Nevertheless, we needed to discover how we could fruitfully establish a collaboration with Odin Teatret, its people, venues and resources.

We have received a great deal during Odin Teatret's long life, and we have always felt that we should give back. From my first day with the group I have been aware of this principle. Even though I was convinced I didn't know anything, it was my obligation to share my experience, by performing and teaching, organising and writing, promoting and reassuring. Apart from my everyday work as an actress – training, rehearsing, performing and touring – the festival Transit, the journal *The Open Page*, participating in The Magdalena Project network, directing performances with other actors, giving workshops, organising tours, motivating and communicating with those who work in the administration, keeping an ever increasing correspondence alive and feeding a complex web of contacts all over the world, all this work has been my response to this need to give back by passing on. It has been my way of creating an autonomous role within my group, of finding my place as a woman in its history and participating in determining its vision. And I have grown from doing so.

I pass on skills conscious that the essence of my experience cannot be taught. Each person has to learn from her own mistakes, misunderstandings and longings, adapting what she thinks she is learning to her own needs, translating the working language into words of her own. So many books and theses have been published, quoting terms and concepts like the 'pre-expressive level' that Eugenio and Odin actors have written about, thinking that we use these words when we work in our group, instead of



understanding that these concepts are the result of trying to explain the inexplicable. In our practice only a few words are necessary: impulse, rhythm and power. All the rest comes from resolving concrete tasks and from an embodied knowledge.

In the beginning – in the 1960s and 70s – Odin Teatret organised seminars with other theatre masters so we ourselves could learn, but also earn some money while taking care of the practical aspects for participants who paid. Then – in 70s, 80s and 90s – with ISTA (International School of Theatre Anthropology) and the Third Theatre Group Meetings came the period of collective research and the individuation of common principles beyond cultural backgrounds and artistic genre, comparing our own experience with other classic and contemporary stage traditions. I loved these meetings. I was spellbound by the Asian masters, by their performances, costumes, music, rhythm, commitment and biographies. I was captivated by how I could communicate with them on stage even not talking the same language. I was also fascinated by the familiarity I felt with people making group theatre all over the world and especially in Latin America, by their inventiveness for survival strategies, and the imagination and joy of their performances, by their political and social engagement which reminded me of my own when I was a teenager. They brought back to life my ideals in a different form. I felt at home in those meetings that took place in many different countries.

The Magdalena Project originates from this environment. At first, I participated in the Magdalena to find my autonomy from Odin Teatret and discover the centrality of being a woman in relationship to my craft. Then, after organising some meetings and eventually the recurrent Transit Festival in Holstebro, I have gradually introduced this network of women into Odin Teatret's own identity, making it part of my contribution for change and development in the group. I have thus done the groundwork for potential outcomes that can influence our future. Many of the contacts that promote our tours abroad nowadays are connected to the Magdalena network, many of the associates who have joined us in different projects are women I got to know at Magdalena festivals: Ana Woolf has become Eugenio's assistant director; Carolina Pizarro has become an Odin actor; Parvathy Baul has joined us for the most recent production, *The Tree*; Selene D'Agostino is taking care of my archive as part of her administrative

tasks at Odin Teatret; Keiin Yoshimura was one of the masters at the last ISTA session; Brigitte Cirla and Deborah Hunt are very close collaborators; and many others – too many to name – are continuously active under our umbrella organisation Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium.

But time and circumstance bring change. Many theatre groups dissolved. The Asian masters died, and funding was no longer available for Third Theatre meetings and research in the ISTA sessions. Our need to pass on and share experience at Odin Teatret focused instead on the rigour required to achieve results. Performance became central to our pedagogical activity. It was no longer only a question of finding the freedom and the time to train and rehearse, but of stressing the purpose of apprenticeship and preparation, emphasising the aims and reason for the work. This helped give continuity and meaning in times of crisis, addressing the questions of where and for whom we make theatre, beyond the how.

I believe that we only really learn from the work on a performance. Even when I did not see myself as a director, but just as someone who helped actors to find their autonomy, discover different ways of producing material and encouraged them to understand what they wanted to say, I worked as if the result would be shown publicly. Only the meeting with the spectator demands the detailed precision and exactitude in decision making that does not forgive indulgent solutions and approximate attitudes. Everything we do must reach its maximum, even if that takes more time and we have to start over and over again. Working on performances with other actors has resulted in me learning how to direct from them. They have forced me to transform my own craft as an actress, and the power hidden in my feet, into a way of observing and reacting with images, montage and stories to extract associations and meanings from what they are doing. I have since directed many women and a few men around the world. Will Harald Redmer, Ana Woof, Hisako Miura, Gabriella Sacco, Lorenzo Gleijeses, Manolo Muoio, Carolina Pizarro, Teresa Ruggeri, Marilyn Nunes, The Jasonites, Amaranta Osorio, Teresa García, Luciana Martuchelli, prolong my existence in the future?

But the work demonstrations, performances, workshops, seminars, meetings, festivals are never enough. If I want to pass on knowledge that will live on anonymously in the future and leave a seed that will find its own fertile ground in which to grow, I still need to do more. Within the

Magdalena Project network we have also often spoken of the necessity to let go. It is difficult to achieve a balance between allowing others to take over and at the same time guaranteeing quality. Much of my energy today is dedicated to walking this line between the need to protect my professional and personal identity, and the equally strong urge to pass on everything I know, so that it will live on transformed by fertile misunderstandings, banal betrayals, original inspiration or ingenious imitations.

During the years of change, Eugenio became disheartened at the prospect of organising a new ISTA session without the collaborators he had learned to trust and who had died. He could not imagine preparing a new *Theatrum Mundi* performance, even when, during a meal, our friend Trevor Davies asked him to do so for a festival at Kronborg Castle in Elsinore. I have always had difficulty in letting an opportunity pass without taking advantage of it. I remember that on that occasion – while clearing up the plates in the kitchen – I tried to plant some ideas in Eugenio’s mind in order to persuade him to respond positively: it could be an opportunity to support the Balinese Gambuh project, we could involve the recently met Noh actor Akira Matsui, but, most of all, we could develop our pedagogical approach beyond the basic actor’s training. Many people had asked to follow Eugenio while he was rehearsing a performance and now, we could organise a structure for this to happen.

Thus, a chorus of international actors were included in the intercultural performances *Ur-Hamlet* (2006 and 2009) and *The Marriage of Medea* (2008). They could experience being directed by Eugenio and work on stage with Odin Teatret actors and performers from Bali, Japan, India and Brazil. It was a unique occasion for all of us. It also meant that we were able to travel to Bali for rehearsals and develop our collaboration with the Afro-Brazilian dancer, Augusto Omolú. It was a dream come true and the people involved in the two performances have remained closely connected to Odin Teatret ever since. For all of us, both young and older, it was a school rooted in experience that changed lives as well as giving technical tools for the profession. In the *Theatrum Mundi* performance, *The Marriage of Medea*, Medea was played by the Balinese performer, Ni Made Partini, and Jason by Tage Larsen. The performance was organised like a wedding procession and feast, during which Medea advanced followed by a family of thirty-three Balinese dancers and musicians and a

coloured fishing boat, and Jason was accompanied by his family of friends, a group of young performers from all over the world whom Augusto Omolú led in their dances. We started calling the young international performers *The Jasonites*.

In 2012, the Danish Ministry of Culture halved Odin Teatret's grant. The cuts took away the freedom we had achieved to build a permanent ensemble, an environment rooted in art, pedagogy, research and international as well as local projects. We could not justify our choice to fund a school for the most ancient form of theatre in Bali, to help the tour of a Cuban theatre group, or to support a newly born network of women. But for us these kinds of activities were the realisation of a cultural policy which gave meaning to our daily work. To defend our beliefs and way of working, we needed to present our activities in the context of schemes and references others could recognise and understand, we had to make what we were doing beyond the *normal* theatre activity of creating performances and touring them more visible. We had to safeguard our particular identity as a theatre group whose overloaded past is the premise for change.

The need to attract a younger generation to Holstebro, who might perhaps continue our policy once we have gone, has resulted in a modification of our theatre's organisation. We started to call a range of our usual activities – workshops and meetings but also hosting performances and giving groups a space to rehearse – *residences*. The condition is that resident artists should regularly *intervene* in Holstebro, by for example visiting a school or an old people's home, collaborating with the Ballet School or the Public Library, performing in the pedestrian street or presenting parts of their performances at the refugee centre. In this way we are giving continuity to Odin Teatret's presence in Holstebro under different names and opening up opportunities for resident artists to understand the multicultural facets and scope of theatre practice.

Odin Teatret is the name of a particular relationship between the director Eugenio Barba and a specific group of actors who work permanently together. But at the same time every one of us has promoted and developed many activities outside this collective framework. Under what name should these activities exist? This is an old discussion. I remember how, in 1983, I had to defend having presented *The Night of the Vagabonds*, a performance directed by Else Marie Laukvik, in which I

performed with Silvia Ricciardelli and Ulrik Skeel, in an Odin Teatret programme. Eugenio had been on sabbatical at the time. He had left giving the younger generation the task of revolutionising the group, but when he returned, he re-established the authority of the oldest. I had to call a meeting of the whole group to back me against Eugenio's protests at the use of Odin Teatret's name in a way that he disagreed with. This discrepancy made the rules much clearer for the future.

Until recently, if I directed a group of actors, the performance was presented under their name, underlining independence from Odin Teatret as much as possible. But this practice also effaced my contribution to the work in the official reports. Most of my additional engagements would disappear if I only looked at the statistics, instead of taking into consideration the long-lasting effect on the people I work with. What should the many collective and individual initiatives and activities that make up the complex identity of our group be called? They escaped definition, not being Odin Teatret in a strict sense.

At the same time independent actors, who have developed in close connection to Odin Teatret, whom we finance directly or through the use of our space, and who want to acknowledge the support they receive, did not have a framework in which to do so. How could we demonstrate to the Danish Ministry of Culture the immense range of our activity, and therefore render more visible the practice of individuals teaching and directing workshops, groups, festivals and performances without them being attributed to Odin Teatret? We needed to find a name.

Years ago, in the 80s, when Iben Nagel Rasmussen, the Danish actress who joined Odin Teatret in 1966, wanted to leave the group to work permanently with her pupils, Eugenio transformed our structure by inverting the title and subtitle, so that Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium became the umbrella under which one could find Odin Teatret, ISTA, Farfa (Iben's group), Basho (directed by Toni Cots), The Canada Project (directed by Richard Fowler), Odin Teatret Film, and Odin Teatret Publishing House. This new arrangement allowed Eugenio to maintain a connection with Toni, who no longer wanted to perform with Odin Teatret, to include ISTA in our list of activities even when Odin Teatret's actors did not participate, but, above all, it was a way to avoid Iben losing the place she

had helped to build. The fruit of her work would be available to her even though she wanted to follow her own path.

Giving autonomy to each member, whilst still maintaining a meaningful collaboration, is one of the reasons for Odin Teatret's longevity. Even though we prioritise our group performances above any other activity, we have always been encouraged to develop our own interests and nourish the diversity and strength of our individual personalities. I prize this good fortune, especially when I witness the sadness with which Roxana Pineda of Estudio Teatral in Cuba, and Anna Zubrzycka of Song of the Goat in Poland, finally decided to leave the groups they co-founded after divorce from the partners with whom they had shared the first years.

After *The Marriage of Medea*, some of The Jasonites participated in the second edition of *Ur-Hamlet* and then decided to meet again independently and continue their collaboration. My personal ties with The Jasonites developed each time I met them, and one of the consequences was that I directed their performance *Tomorrow*, as well as assisting with *Shakespills*. Four of the Jasonites continued to meet working with the theme *Love Stories* to prepare their contribution for the Holstebro Festuge in 2011. Isadora Pei, Marcelo Miguel, Alberto Martinez Guinaldo and Giuseppe L. Bonifati made a treasure from what they had experienced during the Festuge in 2008 with *The Marriage of Medea*. They remained in Holstebro for longer periods to work with schools and collaborate with Deborah Hunt, preparing theatrical sketches which could be presented in all kinds of situations.

The Jasonites thus created their autonomous local network of contacts and were able to indicate to us some schools and people who could join and support us when we decided to invite children and youth theatre/dance ensembles from Bali, Kenya, Italy and Brazil to celebrate Odin Teatret's 50th anniversary in 2014. In the years between the Festuge of 2011 and 2014, Odin Teatret was also part of an international project that received European funding for a caravan stage that would travel throughout Europe for two years to present performances on the theme of crisis and renaissance. Since Odin Teatret was busy with its own local and international commitments, I was asked to direct a performance that The Jasonites could present as part of this project, combining open air performance with barbers and workshops. It was an opportunity for The

Jasonites to perform and train as leaders of social interaction. This performance, *Banana Revival*, became a Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium production, laying down the path for our future practice of using this network.

In the same period, at Odin Teatret, we started a school called WIN (Workout for Intercultural Navigators), for those interested in using their skills as an actor not only in performance, but as a technique to weave relationships and create connections in the different tissues of a community. We defined the *intercultural* questions – which are normally thought of in terms of ethnic, racial or national specificities – by recognising the different sub-cultures with their specific bonds, affinities, norms and habits: those who live in the country or in the town, who work in a factory or in a shop, who go to a technical or a literary school, who are young or old, who have travelled abroad or have not... The workshop leaders were Odin actors, but also The Jasonites and other close collaborators like Deborah Hunt or Pierangelo Pompa, to whom we could entrust a pedagogical responsibility.

With the exception of the most recent performance, *The Tree*, during the rehearsal process Eugenio was usually accompanied by various assistants. It was his way of trying to pass on his experience as a director. One of them, Italian Pierangelo Pompa, decided to settle down in Holstebro. At first, he assisted Eugenio in many activities, working with Odin Teatret Archives and taking care of many everyday tasks at the theatre, where help is always needed, especially when the group is on tour. Pierangelo also led workshops, culminating in a performance since he wanted to build an autonomous group. This has resulted in the creation of Altamira Studio Teater, resident at Odin Teatret since the beginning of 2014, and receiving financial and logistical help. The group is developing a presence in Holstebro and other towns in the region with the intention of becoming independent and having its own circuit of venues within a couple of years.

All these activities needed to be publicised. With Selene D'Agostino, from our administration, and Pierangelo, I started to plan a website dedicated exclusively to Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium. It informed about NTL productions (performances directed by Odin actors and performances to which Odin Teatret has given substantial financial support); NTL residences (groups and artists working at the theatre in Holstebro for longer

or shorter periods); NTL workshops (workshops held at Odin Teatret by artists in residence); associated NTL activities (barbers, interventions, parades). To make the outside world understand the difference between NTL and Odin Teatret, we had to publish a definition on our website.

A long time was spent trying to define a situation that is continuously evolving. It was – and is – not easy. Every case seemed to present an exception, and everyone had a different understanding of the words that we used to describe artistic and pedagogical relationships that change so much they appear contradictory. When Selene returned to Italy and Pierangelo focused his attention on his own group, Sabrina Martello and Rina Skeel, in addition to their other tasks at Odin Teatret, took on responsibilities relating to the NTL residencies and announcements. I continue to follow all the activities, trying to coordinate the developments and facilitate the communication between the young resident artists, Odin actors, the administration, and Eugenio.

My involvement in managerial tasks at Odin Teatret has developed over the years. In the early 1980s I organised the filming of *Come! And the Day Will Be Ours* and assisted Eugenio during a theatre group meeting in Bahia Blanca in Argentina. When Eugenio did not accompany many of the tours of *The Gospel According to Oxyrhincus*, I started writing a daily logbook to keep him informed of the everyday problems. During Eugenio's sabbatical year I was part of the group directing all the activities of the theatre and my role was to keep the communication flowing between the 'young' and 'innovative' Toni Cots and the 'old' and 'conservative' Torgeir Wethal, with the help of the 'democratic' Ulrik Skeel. When Leif Bech, who was our tour manager for many years, left in 1988 just before a tour to Italy with our new performance *Talabot*, I became involved in all the negotiations with our hosts. Since then, we have tried out various structures, one of which we called *filter*, which consisted of Torgeir, Ulrik, Søren Kjems (our administrator) and me, to help release Eugenio from administrative tasks, until it was decided in 2014 that I would be his *stedfortræder* (a deputy, taking his place when he is not there) or managing director, to reassure the Ministry of Culture and Holstebro Municipality, who were giving us grants and were worried about Eugenio's retiring. In practice these titles do not change anything for me. I am always very aware that Eugenio is the person ultimately taking decisions; I do not want to take

his place. I have no desire to take part in the disputes that occur to get his attention. I just continue, in addition to being an actress and a director, to deal with a wide range of autonomous initiatives by individual Odin actors, new projects that continuously change within the NTL, and all the planning of the Odin ensemble's tours and other collective activities. The expansion of the NTL has coincided with my assumption of all these responsibilities.

But misunderstandings are also caused by other people's expectations. Even though we insist time and time again that Odin Teatret will die with us, the question always crops up: who has been chosen by Eugenio Barba and the Odin actors to continue their work? Every appraisal and criticism, every action and reaction, every assignment and recommendation, every distribution of responsibility and projects, is interpreted as a sign of a premeditated strategy instead of a response to evolving situations. When I point out the misinterpretations that Eugenio's behaviour produces at times, or when, as the theatre's managing director, I try to implement the consequence of his wishes and needs, this can produce reactions, resentments and even blame. I am not interested in status and over the years I have learned to cover myself with a layer of oil that allows accusations of manipulating to give privileges or reprimands slide away. I am often reminded of the difficult position of many other women who openly or in the background have had to take over the leadership of their theatre companies and groups.

My priority has been to create the conditions for Eugenio to work with us in the rehearsal space and be present at the performances as much as possible, alleviating his administrative burden, and encouraging him to accept projects that might develop in unforeseen directions. While I take responsibility for this range of occupations, I also defend my position as an actress, because I know my roots are there. Focusing my attention on being an actress maintains my balance and freedom in a group where most people have not chosen to work with me, but with Eugenio. We usually find a basic unity of intentions once conflicts that are not fundamental are resolved. We are aware that we need to protect our artistic work, which is the essential that keeps us together. This awareness of the need to safeguard what is important, and not allow disagreements to take over, deepened with the loss of two colleagues: Torgeir Wethal, one of the founders of Odin

Teatret, who died in 2010, and Augusto Omolú, the Afro Brazilian dancer who was murdered in 2013.

Of course, many questions still remain: what will happen to the buildings with their working spaces, changing rooms, offices, workshops, store-rooms, kitchens, beds, tables, chairs, cupboards, computers, printers, projectors, lights, and sound equipment? What will happen to the performances and their props and costumes? What will happen to the archives and the books, films, photographs, documents, letters, programmes, newspaper cuttings? With every day that goes by, more historical items are collected at Odin Teatret with the purpose of passing on our experience, and more spaces have been built to host activities and materials. The task of making order for the future in all of this is overwhelming, especially for a theatre that continues to function with a growing number of activities and where there is no time to stop and think and prepare.

At the beginning it was easy: every letter had a blue copy that was archived by date and a white copy that was archived in the folder for the appropriate activity. If we wanted to use a photograph in a book, the photographer had to produce a copy on paper. The 36- or 18-mm films filled the editing room but were easy to see and to find. But then came computers, digital photographs, video tapes and digital film copies, emails instead of telephone calls or letters or faxes, hard disks, pen drives, data bases... Everyone at the theatre created their own system and habits, and just thinking of how to share and transform our address book, removing all those who had died in the meantime, provoked an incredible crisis. Slowly, with the help of the youngest amongst us and some specialists, we started thinking of organising our archives. After our 40th anniversary when we invited many guests to Holstebro, and the 45th when we sold the rights of *The Poor Theatre* for one euro to the Polish Grotowski Institute, and with the prospect of the 50th anniversary which loomed like a deadline with no tomorrow, the need to decide what to do with all our papers was becoming urgent.

Eugenio's brother Ernesto had collected a conspicuous library throughout his life, which he kept at his mother's house in Rome. After his brother's and his mother's death, Eugenio had to decide what would happen to all the books. He soon realised that few people have room to

keep such precious items, and that public institutions are reluctant to take on private donations without financial back up for their maintenance. Eugenio started thinking about what would happen to his own library after his death, and who should receive all his historically precious documents, like, for example, his private correspondence with Jerzy Grotowski.

In 2004, a decade-long collaboration between Odin Teatret and Aarhus University culminated in the establishment of the CTLS – Centre for Theatre Laboratory Studies, for which we built a second floor on our theatre that was financed by Eugenio mortgaging his home. All the archive specialists we consulted advised us not to give the archive to a university because the institution would not have the means or experience to take care of it and make it available for future generations of scholars. The world was entering an economic crisis and Aarhus University's promised funds vanished. The obligation to pay the salary of the people working at CTLS was assumed by Odin Teatret.

For me it was also important for the archives to remain at the theatre in the future. Having visited Bertolt Brecht's homes in Berlin and in Svendborg, as well as Meyerhold's apartment in Moscow, I strongly believed that the spaces, with their walls and windows, gardens and corridors, retain some energy and flavour of what has happened there in the past. I also insisted that students would have a greater motivation for coming to Holstebro if they could consult our documents. I was thinking of how to maintain the theatre as an attractive destination when there were no longer performances to be seen or actors to learn from. It was a very lonely battle. Around me, Eugenio and other people could not imagine that Holstebro would continue to finance a sort of museum or library in our buildings, once Odin Teatret has ceased to exist.

I found myself crying in impotence at an international meeting on the theme of *Living Archives*, realising I did not have the time to dedicate myself to this problematic project and that the only way to influence the decisions would be to take full responsibility for this gigantic task. At one point I even thought of starting a fund with my own money that could pay someone to take care of the archives in the future and for the rent of the rooms that would be necessary to host them. I followed the process of decisions concerning the archives as much as possible, contributing and helping however I could, but I also had to stay in the background,

recognising that my main tasks were elsewhere. Eugenio finally gave the responsibility for organising Odin Teatret Archives (OTA) to Mirella Schino, supported by Francesca Romana Rietti and Valentina Tibaldi, and independent from CTLS and Aarhus University. At first the idea was to give the archives to the Gramsci Foundation in Italy, but, luckily, while focusing on the Danish roots of Odin Teatret, The Royal Library of Copenhagen declared itself happy to receive our archive. Eugenio insisted on the work being completed by June 2014, for Odin Teatret's 50th anniversary.

The consequent pressure of this decision was explosive. All the letters, documents, photographs and films that would be passed on to The Royal Library had to be digitalised, organised and catalogued. Heaps of papers kept on appearing from every corner of the theatre and were brought in from private homes. I decided that I still needed to access my own archives, mostly those connected with The Magdalena Project, *The Open Page* journal, Transit Festival, my work as a director and my articles, so only those folders of mine that concerned Odin tours, ISTA and correspondence were included in the first despatch to The Royal Library in 2014. I am still using my papers and diaries and I decided to include them in the documents that will be sent in 2025, in the second transfer.

Discussing the destination of the archives of both Odin Teatret and The Magdalena Project with Diana Taylor, a Mexican scholar working at New York University, we wondered how we could assure the presence of women in the documents on which future historical reconstruction is based. The Magdalena Project has always focused on documentation, but the specificity of archiving performance material and the experience embodied in performers is a challenge. For the time being, I have asked Selene D'Agostino to look after my archives, partly to relieve the work of OTA's staff and partly as a response to the cool reaction to my feminist preoccupations. I accept that it is to be expected that Eugenio's writings would be prioritised and worked on in a different way from my own, but I still feel it is my responsibility to open a space that other women can use in the future.

Superficial history concentrates on the top of the iceberg. Too often those who don't know Odin Teatret's complex network of initiatives and the less visible undertakings of each of its members prefer to focus on

Eugenio and the main performances. I have often found myself explaining that Odin Teatret is the result of the interaction between him and the actors, that our work includes cultural processes as well as artistic products, that each individual in the group has her or his own history and point of view, and that the actors' writings should also be known and publicised in order to have a full understanding of the differences within and the meaning of our group.

After deciding how to preserve our documents, a completely different solution was found to *archive* the props and costumes from the old performances, no longer in the repertoire but stored in the various attics in the theatre: Eugenio decided to burn them all during the performance to celebrate our 50th anniversary and in front of the friends invited to Holstebro to celebrate with us. Else Marie Laukvik, one of the founders of Odin Teatret, objected to the burning. Since she burnt herself badly while rehearsing *Memoria*, she is afraid of fire. We all imagined the whole neighbourhood around the theatre enveloped in flames as we considered the size of the bonfire that all the costumes and props from performances since 1964 would need. Eugenio gave in to Else Marie's protests and instead a deep grave was dug in the theatre's garden so that everything could be buried.

The idea of destroying the props and costumes I had built, painted, sewn and embroidered with so much care over the years was shocking to me. I kept on thinking of the future museum of my dreams while Eugenio explained that no one would be interested in old rags and an extravagant collection of objects that only had a meaning for those who vividly remembered the images from the performances. A compromise was found when we decided that those who wanted to keep something could, as long as they took it home, and that we could give away as presents the pieces that our friends particularly wanted to have as keepsakes.

The performance for the 50th anniversary became a trilogy with the title *Measuring Time – If the Grain of Wheat Does Not Die (the future); Clear Enigma (the past); Alexander's Secret (the present)*. The anniversary celebration was planned for the last week-end of the Holstebro Festuge in June 2014 for which we had already decided to invite artistic ensembles of children and adolescents from Bali (Sanggar Seni Tri Suari), Kenya (The Koinonia Children Team), Italy (Junior Band di Spina), and Brazil (Ilé

Omolú), together with many other groups which included Teatro Potlach and Dynamis Teatro from Italy and the Ashtanaga Kalam Pulluvan Pattu and Parvathy Baul from India. To celebrate our old age, we wanted the company of young people who had years and years in front of them.

Then we sent an invitation to our entire contact list to join us on the day. I was terrified by the practical implications, imagining a rally as big as the one the scouts had just organised in Holstebro or a kind of Woodstock festival. Eugenio was convinced that only one hundred people would want to come all the way to Denmark at their own expense. Answers started pouring in from all over the world and I finally convinced Eugenio to count them. We already had more than eight-hundred guests. Where would they sleep and eat? How could they physically all see the performance we were preparing for them? At that point we started answering that there was no longer room to come. We accepted five hundred people, those who had been the first to answer. It was a painful process to write to so many close friends and tell them that they could not be with us to celebrate.

But how could we refuse all the people in Holstebro who wanted to take part in 'their' theatre's 50th anniversary? We decided to divide the performance into three sections: the first at the park and open to everyone; the second at Odin Teatret for a more restricted group of spectators; and the third as a celebratory meal only for the guests. But even if the numbers for the second and third part were restricted to six-hundred, we had to consider the re-organisation of the space so that everyone could see. It was necessary to raise the visibility of the scenes and so, in our back garden and car park, we built a boat-stage, a mountain-stage, a house-stage, a tower-stage, and a big island-stage over a pond that we called Epidaurus. Odin's film makers, Claudio Coloberti and Chiara Crupi, were responsible for live-streaming the second performance, *Clear Enigma*, which could be shown in real time on the big screen at the Holstebro Municipal Theatre and followed online by all those who could not be with us in person.

To give life to the old characters and the costumes for one last time, we had to reconstruct what we remembered of the performances and play the scenes with those actors who had originally taken part in them. Luckily many video recordings of the performances and rehearsals were available. It was amazing to see how the visibly different, aged bodies remembered all the details of the scores, how the voices evoked the inflections and

intonation of the words, how the dialogues of actions had the same precision of impulse.

As we performed all these scenes, the Indian Pulluvan ceremony finished their coloured sand drawing of intertwining snakes which had taken many hours to prepare. Then a fire dance followed with chants and repetitive string and percussion music, ending with two girls in trance destroying the drawing with their long black hair. After the last image from *Ashes of Brecht*, while Iben stood on the barrel on the rooftop and the red flag had turned into a thin piece of burnt cloth, the young people of the Italian Band of Spina started playing rock and roll. That was the signal for the children from all the other groups to rush to gather up the costumes and props that had been left as totems after the scenes and place them on a long conveyer belt that dropped everything into the big grave that had just been uncovered. The children were running and laughing, really enjoying themselves. They smiled at each other, helped each other, talked to each other even though they had no common language. What I had imagined as a terrifying moment as the costumes were about to be buried, became joyful. It was difficult not to be captivated by the children's exuberant lightness and carelessness.

On the other side of the world, looking at the streaming of the performance, our friend Maria Porter was worried that Mr Peanut, my character with the skeleton head, was being buried as well. But only the costumes and props from performances and characters no longer in the repertoire ended up in the hole that was then covered with earth brought by a bulldozer. Many spectators could not really believe that we would leave them there forever. They had to accept this fact when they saw a swing being built rapidly on top of the grave in which 50 years of performances were buried. Children were already swinging over them. Few will know what is buried underneath, when the grass grows in the springs to come.

Now, in May 2016, we have two permanent resident groups at Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium: Altamira Studio Teater and Divano Occidentale Orientale. Giuseppe L. Bonifati and his partner Linda Sugataghy have founded the Art Party and started a campaign to become Mayor and First Lady of Holstebro, realising the longest performance in the world, lasting for eighteen months, from January 2016 until the Festuge in June 2017. Many other groups and individuals come for shorter residencies

and all the Odin actors continue to direct performances that become NTL co-productions. Odin Teatret has a younger generation of actors who live permanently in Holstebro, giving workshops and participating in the performances. We are all busily preparing the Festuge for 2017 under the title *The Wild West – Roots and Shoots – Re-think* for which we plan to fill Holstebro with horses, sheep and centaurs. Eugenio will celebrate his 80th birthday in October 2016 offering coffee and cake to everyone at the refugee centre in Holstebro. In the meantime, we try to keep up with the intense programme of activities which include tours, festivals and workshops. Our future is as busy as ever.

I once saw an exhibition of the paintings Pablo Picasso made after he was eighty years old. The paintings were full of enjoyment and pleasure in life. It was so evident that he no longer needed to demonstrate originality, technique and responsibility; he just painted what he felt like, with no regard for any of the rules. When I am asked about the future of Odin Teatret, and my personal future as a member of the group, I remember this exhibition. I think of the years we have spent learning and then teaching, the period of our youth and our maturation, and the long preparation to pass on our experience. But now we feel a juvenile freedom, with nothing to prove while we just keep alive the sense of being alive. As I write this, I suddenly realise that *we* are the children playing on the swing we planted over our history. And one of the first powerful movements right up into the air has been to start rehearsing our next production, *The Tree*, without any regard for the difficulties we may have in the future to sell and perform it.

The Nest

A year before starting rehearsals for the new performance, in the Brazilian Mato Grosso, I saw a nest hanging from the branch of a tree. It was shaped like an elongated balloon. A flock of small green parrots was making a devilish noise under the nest. They were flying around chasing each other. They seemed to be playing. Perhaps they were intent on judging the shape of the nest or exchanging information about the tastiest insects in the area. The sound of their cheeping was similar to their name in French, also used in Brazil: *perroquet*. If I repeat this word quickly, making the consonants vibrate in between high-pitched vowels, I feel the same excitement, urgency and fun.

Countless small dry branches of different sizes, pieces of grass, flowers, dead leaves, seeds, and perhaps some capybara or tapir hairs, along with saliva and wind helped to create this dangling shelter – like a work of high architectural engineering – under which the parrots flew. How does one build a nest, something so simple and yet so complex at the same time? I unwittingly think of the creation of a performance. After decades of work as an actress, I feel that the construction technique is similar. It consists of allowing oneself to be guided by intuition and experience, by a knowledge deposited in the cells, as if it were something else that decides, and not we who are involved in the process.

Sticks, leaves, hair, saliva and wind: many different and often hidden materials are involved in forming a performance and shaping a character – my own actor's nest and shelter. Some materials show themselves only in a gesture of an improvisation, in the position of the foot while walking, in a way of looking. Others solidify into scenes, texts, songs. But most of the materials defy the spectators' awareness, they remain undetectable because they are not visible on the surface. In addition to the research connected to the theme of the performance, the context in which the characters move, the creation of the stage and lighting design, the logic of the music, the montage of the text, my inner universe and my imagination are also part of a performance's baggage of information. Hundreds of experiences, memories, wishes and meetings populate my actress's subconscious and give depth to my presence on stage.

Many episodes relate to my personal genesis of *The Tree*. They are the references that stimulate the life of my character, a Yazidi monk who plants a tree in the desert to bring back the birds. My future in the performance, which will be presented to spectators for some years to come, is based on a mixture of ingredients from my past and present (Varley, 2010). Unlike the process for other performances, this time, after forty years as an actress, the inspiration comes from a simple room filled with furniture and from travel recollections, from the sounds and images of natural phenomena and animal life. They are experiences that communicate with the theme of the performance from afar, that do not need to be explained. They are the source of images that nourish my actions as an actress. They take me back home: to the working room where I put together materials and prepare for the future performance – a nest hanging in the void.

Wild animals in the Brazilian Mato Grosso Pantanal are not afraid of human beings. For generations they have passed on the information to each other that men are harmless. Hunting has been prohibited in this region for many years. This does not mean that I was not afraid of the scorpions and spiders that often ended up close to my feet. When I found myself sitting at night on the roof of the jeep, armed with a torch to catch wild animals in the beam of light, every time I heard a *jacaré* (alligator) bark, I jumped in the opposite direction, as if a few centimetres could save me. It was a mysterious sound, hoarse and loud. That same night I saw a white tapir, and the moon resting on the branch of a dead tree beside the black shadows of two birds with long curved beaks.

At dawn I looked at the blue macaws perched on the trees near the house. I listened to the parrot couples kissing each other on the neck behind their heads. The sounds they emitted were full of love and attention. Every now and then they flew off to change position on the branches. They went back to kissing by crossing their beaks while they were attentive to the approach of other animals. They had their own alphabet. I understood that my bird language could be enriched by consonants and lower tones. A new vocal perspective opened-up for me to compete with the concerts of the frogs and crickets singing at the sides of a long bridge, over a stretch of water covered in pink flowers.

The capybaras are among the animals I prefer. I love to watch them running and bouncing around. They always have a playful, optimistic air, as if they are smiling amicably. Along a path I saw a group of capybara families with their cubs. They were resting in the shade of a tree, not far from the *jacaré* that were taking advantage of the sun in the middle of the road. I learned to distinguish the eyes of the *jacaré* submerged in the pond nearby from twigs or wisps of grass.

I focussed my attention to catch sight of some examples of the incredible variety of birds around me. They say that there are seven hundred different species in the Pantanal. I was happy to see the tuiuiús again, with their white bodies, vermilion red necks and black heads. I studied them as they walked alone in the undergrowth and as a couple standing high in the trees on their giant nest. Their rhythm was so different from that of the Cardinal birds that circled the puddles of water in the morning. From a canoe, I saw the hawks that have learned to dive to catch

the fish thrown by the guide with his camera ready. I discovered a nest with two chicks – not really all that small – with feathers the same colour as the branches, stretching their body, neck and beak completely still so as not to attract attention, waiting for the mother – or perhaps the father – to come and feed them. They were a good image of a motionless dynamic impulse. I was fascinated by all the different shapes of birds and nests. I thought of a book of bird architecture and I began to take photographs myself.

In the salt desert in the north of Chile, pink flamingos stood out like a splash of colour on a painter's still white canvas. Their legs were slender and long – they could break like twigs in the wind. When one leg rested, the other supported the large body of feathers. The neck rose to look far away, the breeze passed between the feathers, the birds remained still and impassive. They were spots of motionless life in the middle of nowhere.

In a part of Patagonia in Argentina, the coast was dotted with holes and there was a strong smell of fish. At each hole, a penguin stood guard. It protected the eggs or the hatchlings at the entrance to the nest. Other penguins walked in line and then dived into the waves. It was like a motorway with hundreds of these birds that walked clumsily and then swam with confidence and speed in search of food. They stopped for a moment to check the way and turned their heads and beaks in unison towards the wind. From close-up, with feathers like fish-scales, they seemed less elegant. I could have watched them for hours, studying their funny steps, their hops, the way they slip into the water, how they lower their heads to avoid the biggest waves, how they take off and fly, how they feed their chicks and monitor anyone approaching. Some take a running start, the beak pushed forward, the wings pulled back and the small legs trotting in search of the necessary speed. Others sway gently as they approach the point where the waves break on the beach. Nothing distracted them from their activities, not even the impressively dark red sunset that announced a rapid nightfall. An armadillo crossed the endless stretch of penguin nests. Its haste seemed to whisper to me that it was time to go home.

In the middle of Chamula's market in Mexico, I saw a crucified dead bird. The head hung to the side and its wide-spread wings were nailed to wood just like a Christ. I have no idea why the bird was displayed like this. The image stayed with me as I stopped at a stall of containers made of dried, empty pumpkins. The noise of the feast in the square, and the

murmur from the church I had just visited, echoed in my ears. I chose two small gourds and bought ten kilos of corn. I had been thinking for some time that I should feed birds with grains of corn. Perhaps to avoid them being crucified.

In Wuzhen, in China – frightened by the traffic, celebrity adoration, pursuit of profit, neon lights that colour the skyscrapers along the shore – in the world of theatre I was impressed by the tiny steps of a traditional female character in an evocative night performance directed by Stan Lai. The steps followed each other rapidly, one just in front of the other, almost as if they would slide backwards instead of moving forwards, as if escaping into a past that will never return. A few days later, during a work demonstration in a theatre made from an ancient tea-house, I made an improvisation. I dived into the sea, I went back and forth like the waves, I became the back of a whale, I emitted a spray of water and air that returned on itself like two birds pecking at each other, I bit as fast as a moray eel, I rocked like a seahorse, I flew like a flock of swallows, I floated floppily like an octopus. Outside red flags waved with no hint of socialism. I recalled the tragic book about adopted Chinese girls, I bought jade objects, ate with chopsticks, listened to the intonation of a language I didn't understand and looked with amazement at the theatres that had been built in just one year to host a new theatre festival. I knew that there were incredible landscapes in China, I had been told about mountains, forests and animals, but I could only see them in paintings, in sets and in my imagination. It was in Wuzhen that, one evening, Eugenio gathered the Odin actors in his room to tell us about the new performance which he called *Flying*. The actors, like birds, were ready to take off and fly far away. I was already thinking of the materials with which to build my nest for the future performance that would finally be called *The Tree*.

Epilogue

I am often asked where I want to live when I retire, or when I am 'old', as if I wasn't mature enough already. My friend, Geddy Aniksdal, always tells me we can only start complaining about our age when we are well over seventy. Sometimes my colleagues from The Magdalena Project and I talk of a home where we could spend the last years of our life together. I wonder what the role of The Magdalena Project will be in the

future now that I have even invited two men to perform at the next Transit Festival to express their preoccupation with the loss of male self-assurance, while women are gaining confidence. I try to avoid thinking about what will happen to me tomorrow. I only know that I can't imagine staying in Holstebro if Odin Teatret no longer exists and I can't imagine myself at Odin Teatret if Eugenio is no longer the director.

This year, 2016, Eugenio turns eighty. I am aware eternity is not in front of us. My absolute priority is that we should spend as much time as possible together. This is an impediment to giving time to my friends and family and, also, in realising my own personal projects. Some friends understand, some protest, my mother would like me to receive more personal recognition, a lot of people worry about me working too hard. I am aware that the job I have chosen to do and the responsibilities I have accepted do not give me privileges, quite the contrary. When I feel tired, I remind myself of the luck and joy of being alive, of not being alone, and of being free to take decisions. Some might think I am sacrificing myself, like Obba who cut off her ears for love. But I recognise the meaning of my sacrifice in the following words taken from Eugenio's article in the programme for Odin Teatret's new performance *The Tree*:

In the fiction of theatre, sanctity doesn't consist in accomplishing extraordinary deeds, but in the stubbornness of making ordinary things extraordinary. In theatre, sanctity is a rare plant whose roots are artifice (*ars facere*) and sacrifice (*sacrum facere*). Artifice is linked to the skill of creating a fiction which is more intense than life itself through the actor's physical and mental know-how. Sacrifice does not necessarily involve hardship and suffering abnegation. It is the accomplishment of an action celebrating the essential – the value which gives a sense to ourselves and to what we do through our craft.

Some days I am happy just to go for a walk together at sunset along a beach, other days in discovering a new place for the first time. Some days it is the prospect of an impending project that fills me with enthusiasm, other days that a job has finally been completed. As I am about to conclude the article that forced me to think of the three main questions I confront while considering the future, I confess that what was tomorrow when I started writing is already yesterday, that what I imagined would happen has already taken a different direction, and that my tasks and dreams develop in tune with the changes around me. Writing fixes time as if it stood still, and the

words put together without respecting the succession of facts and the reality of events reveal possible truths. The reader's interpretation will eventually determine the consequences of what I am trying to say.

I am at home today. It is the Easter holidays, and we have just come back from Paris where Odin Teatret performed at Théâtre du Soleil, celebrating a total of 104 years of theatre made by our two groups. Outside it is still winter: we are in Denmark after all. My mother is sitting in an armchair darning old clothes and once again tells me how happy she was when I left Italy in 1976; otherwise I might have been one of those who ended up in prison or even got killed for political activism. Two days ago, there was another terrorist attack in Brussels. Tomorrow I go to the theatre for rehearsals. Life goes on as usual, despite the inexorable course of history and every human being's relentless need to hope for a better future.

Reference

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Julia Varley is actress of Odin Teatret since 1976, participated in all productions, plus 3 solo performances and 4 work demonstrations. Since 1990, participated in the conception and organization of ISTA (International School of Theatre Anthropology) and, since 1986, of The Magdalena Project. Artistic director of Transit International Festival, editor of *The Open Page*, author of *Wind in the West*, *Notes from an Odin Actress: Stones of Water*, *An actress and her characters - Submerged stories of Odin Teatret*.

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