

AVE MARIA

Death is feeling lonely. A ceremony for the actress María Cánepa

*Three hundred steps in a few moments.
Stone skin above my head.
The dead and the transparent flies
what are they? And what do I matter?
Maybe death doesn't take everything away.*

These verses by the Italian poet Antonio Verri sum up the performance. The British actress Julia Varley evokes her meeting and friendship with the Chilean actress María Cánepa. Death itself celebrates the creative fantasy and dedication of María, who was able to leave a trace after her departure.

Actress: Julia Varley

Text and Director: Eugenio Barba

Assistant Director: Pierangelo Pompa

Sound montage: Jan Ferslev

Odin Teatret thanks Luciana Martuchelli and Cia. YinsPiração of Brasilia, Aderbal Freire and Teatro Poeira of Rio de Janeiro, Teatro Laboratorio Isola di Confine of San Venanzio, Teatro Potlach of Fara Sabina, Marilyn Nunes and the participants of the director's workshop held in Holstebro in October 2012.

Odin Teatret: Eugenio Barba, Kai Bredholt, Roberta Carreri, Claudio Coloberti, Chiara Crupi, Jan Ferslev, Elena Floris, Lene Højmark, Nathalie Jabalé, Donald Kitt, Søren Kjems, Tage Larsen, Else Marie Laukvik, Sofía Monsalve, Annelise Mølgaard Pedersen, Pierangelo Pompa, Fausto Pro, Sigrid Post, Iben Nagel Rasmussen, Francesca Romana Rietti, Anne Savage, Mirella Schino, Pushparajah Sinnathamby, Rina Skeel, Ulrik Skeel, Nando Taviani, Valentina Tibaldi, Julia Varley, Frans Winther.

First performance: Holstebro, 22 October 2012

The Origins of Ave Maria

When Julia Varley said she wanted to make a performance about María Cánepa, I immediately agreed. I had met María and her husband Juan Cuevas in 1988 during Odin Teatret's first visit to Chile, and a deep friendship was born out of this first encounter. Our affectionate bond was nourished also by our common Italian roots, by the experience of both of us being emigrants and by the awareness that theatre was the country we belonged to.

I confess I also had a professional query, a craftsman's curiosity. It was a challenge, and it consisted in wanting to evoke María through a performance that was a ceremony expressing the passion of her professional life as well as the mystery of death. I chose Mr Peanut, who has a skull head, a character already present in other performances by Julia Varley. I wanted this character to renew itself and embody the mystery of the transformation of life into death, while María's voice resounded in space as the song of a torrent among thousands of butterflies.

Finally, I wanted to help my actress declare her affection for another actress by bringing her back to life through theatre. Personally, I wanted to pay my debt of gratitude to María and her husband Juan.



Photo: Rina Skeel



Photo: René Combo

María Cánepa - A Biography

The renowned Chilean actress María Cánepa dies on 27 October 2006 in Santiago, suffering from Alzheimer's. Born on 1 November 1921 in Northern Italy, at the age of four she follows her parents who emigrate to Chile.

Since her schooldays she shows a talent for reciting and singing. María gets her first roles as an actress at the Teatro Experimental of the University of Chile, playing in more than 50 productions, often as the protagonist. At the same time she earns her living as a social worker until her first husband, the director Pedro Orthous, convinces her: "There are plenty of good social workers but few good actresses."

María wishes to have children but, although she undergoes different treatments for many years, she never manages to become pregnant.

In 1971 María and her husband Pedro start the Teatro del Nuevo Extremo which presents performances for the workers of the *poblaciones* on the outskirts of Santiago. The military coup in 1973 and Pinochet's dictatorship forces them to stop. On her husband's death in 1974, María is engaged by the theatre company of the Catholic University. Three years later she meets Juan Cuevas, an actor 30 years younger than her. Juan becomes her new companion. María's mother of over eighty supports the couple, while many friends, scandalised, turn their backs on them.

In 1982 María founds Teatro Q with Juan Cuevas, Héctor Noguera and José Pineda, and then in 1992 a cultural centre in her name which trains young people from the poor districts as cultural community workers. She receives the National Prize for the Arts in 1999. At 78, after twenty years of living together, she accepts to marry Juan Cuevas who has often asked for her hand. She loves cooking and in 2003 she opens an Italian restaurant, La Cánepa.

Her favourite character is Laurencia of *Fuenteovejuna*, a performance of the Municipal Theatre with more than one hundred actors. On the other hand, she is critical of her Lady Macbeth, because she doesn't think her character is passionate enough. She thinks that the young people's theatre lacks feeling, and that Brecht's distancing effect corresponds to an emotional whiplash.

María Cánepa's last coup de théâtre happens with the Pacific Ocean as accomplice. During her funeral, while her husband and friends scatter her ashes in the sea, a sudden wave drenches all those present.



Photo: Rina Skeel

The Embrace of Illusion

Illusion

My face is never visible during the performance of *Ave Maria*. Most of the time I am hidden under the skull mask of Mr Peanut, and for the remainder I am veiled and covered by a big black hat. I represent Death. The director has explained to me that my living skin should not be seen. I never make eye contact with the spectators and in fact I often close my eyes in order to concentrate on the effort of finding my way without seeing. It is a performance that exhausts me, yet it is animated by an essential need. What does an actress who is no more leave behind? Does her imprint on history last for only the time of her performances? How can I fight against oblivion and keep alive those people who mean something to me, like María Cánepa? At a certain point in the performance I say: "It could be that the dead actress so loved by her colleagues has found a new life. I don't know. Who could know? Perhaps it is only an illusion!" Every time I present the performance I have the illusion that I might find an answer to these questions.

María Cánepa

I met María Cánepa when Odin Teatret toured Chile in 1988, during the dictatorship of General August Pinochet. Some Chilean actors had invited Odin Teatret to perform, taking advantage of the fact that we were playing in Peru. They organised our performance *Talabot* in a church and invited us to stay in their homes. I stayed in the centre of Santiago in an apartment belonging to María and her young husband, the director Juan Cuevas. I ate with them every day before going to work. They took care of me. María was an actress with the National Theatre of Chile, accustomed to creating her characters with a text as the starting point. She was Catholic, neat, slender, delicate, emotional, blonde, an actress from top to toe: very different from me.

In Chile, between 1973 and 1989, theatre was a precarious island of freedom. To avoid adverse international reaction, the regime did not shut down all the theatre venues: after all a performance affected only a small number of spectators. Theatre was not strong enough to fight repression head-on, but it was able to maintain a parallel culture as a space for meeting, memory and dialogue.

María participated actively in these activities, opening schools, teaching, founding groups, giving performances.

María was already quite old when I met her for the first time, but everything about her reminded me of a little girl. I saw her many times after that, both in Chile and Denmark. During her last years I corresponded regularly with her husband Juan, in order to receive news of her.

María's wedding

From: Juan Cuevas
Sent: 04 July 2006 00:45
To: j.varley
Subject: María

Dear Julia,
in the last few months María is showing rather advanced symptoms of Alzheimer. She cannot orientate herself in time and space; she doesn't recognise people, even though she sometimes recognises me. We have taken all the necessary precautions: we have employed a maid who lives with us and a nurse who helps her. These are the practical solutions that the doctors recommend in order to make her life easier. Dear Julia, let Eugenio know all this to keep him informed, as María always held both of you in her heart. Although at times María's illness fills me with anguish, I want you to know that I am managing to endure it and my energies are devoted to making her feel as comfortable as possible. I embrace you with the same affection as always,
Juan

From: Julia Varley
Sent: Wed, 5 Jul 2006 15:55:08 +0200
To: Juan Cuevas
Subject: RE: María

Dear Juan,
You and María have always been, and are still, very close to us. I know that it must be hard to live with someone you love who is both herself and someone else at the same time. The most reassuring thing is that she does not suffer and that she is as gentle as she always was. Just this year Iben finished a production, *Ester's Book*, in which she speaks of her mother, a writer who at the end of her life was senile and couldn't remember anything. It is a touching

performance and I hope you will be able to see it one day. Please let us know if we can do anything. You told me once of a student who wanted to interview María. Did she finish the interview? I would like to translate it into English. I would like many women to know about María, even in Europe.

Hoping to see you soon, a big hug from
Julia and Eugenio

From: Juan Cuevas
Sent: 07 July 2006 00:33
To: j.varley
Subject: RE: María

Dear Julia,

Thank-you for your prompt reply. You ask whether you can help in any way and I think you can. For example you can pray for María; think of her to help her get rid of the fear which sometimes doesn't let her sleep; or write her a letter which I will print and she can read. Although she neither remembers exactly nor associates correctly, this will bring joy to her heart and somehow she will feel the tenderness and its source. You hope that she will keep on being gentle and, in the main, she does so. Strangely, she speaks of her childhood all the time, but the most curious thing is that the poet Neruda also called her "gentle María". Latterly she is quieter and even funny. Next Saturday, on the 15th of July, we will get married here at home in a religious ceremony led by a priest who has been a friend for many years. (We will eat hors d'oeuvre and home-made ravioli as tradition dictates. Ah! and a pineapple pie.) The doctors have told me that this phase of her life is uncertain, her condition is deteriorating; they don't know how long she will last - it could be weeks or years. What you say is true; it is very difficult. But for me it is a gift to have her near.

With the same affection as always,
Juan

From: Julia Varley
Sent: Fri, 7 Jul 2006 14:56
To: Juan Cuevas
Subject: RE: María

Dear María,

Do you remember when we improvised together? You were Sancho Panza on a tricycle and I was Don Quixote. You had a lot of fun. It was during a workshop of Eugenio's that Rebeca Ghigliotto and Raúl Osorio organised in Puangue. I have

always admired the way your incredible acting ability is combined with modesty: such an important lesson for young people. A young Australian girl who only spoke English, came out of your poetry reading in Spanish at the Transit Festival here in Holstebro, and said to me: "From now on I will always do my best and I will pay attention to every detail". I often tell theatre groups who devote themselves to training that your preparation for a performance was a visit to the hairdresser. The young women at Transit fell in love with you. You had such a good time on the last night of the Festival, playing *Pumpel og Pimp* with Geddy and Juan, so much so that you forgot to eat. Accompanied by your Juan, who is so much younger than you, you became a myth. This is how it should be!

So many memories unite us. I would really like to be able to give you a hug and talk. You and Juan turned Santiago into a familiar and beloved city to which I like to return. The first time you welcomed me to your home, we spent many hours sitting at the table talking. Then you invited the whole of Odin and we celebrated for a whole night. You introduced us to Father Mariano Puga, the jean-clad priest who lived and celebrated mass in a hut in a district on the outskirts, equipped only with his modest church and his huge commitment. You took us to the grave where Salvador Allende had been buried secretly under a false name. There were some red carnations on the grave: we added more. Together we went to see Pablo Neruda's grave before his body was moved to Isla Negra to lie beside Matilde.

I cried when I listened to a taped interview you sent me by post in which you spoke of the hard years of the dictatorship and of the death of the Poet, Pablo Neruda. In the interview you also talked about your work with women of the *poblaciones*, teaching them to speak aloud with confidence; you gave them diction classes so they could learn to make speeches in public, while their husbands were in jail. I would really like other women to get to know you. And what about your latest adventure, opening a restaurant under your name? I have not been able to eat there yet, but I can imagine how it is. I listen to your voice here in Denmark from the CD recording of poems you sent us. You must know that on the other side of the world there are people who care very much for you, who wish that you will always be serene, that you will sleep calmly close to all those who love you and whom you love, who think of you and protect you. You have to know that your gentle way of being accompanies us, and that your work lives on inside many people around the world. Best wishes to you and to Juan for a beautiful feast on Saturday; we will be there in spirit to taste the ravioli and the cake.

A big, big hug,
Julia and Eugenio

From: Juan Cuevas
Sent: 11 July 2006 00:54
To: j.varley@odinteatret.dk
Subject: RE: María

Dear Julia,

María read your letter aloud many times. Her response was to thank those people who are so important, who will get to know our Mamiña (our kitten whose name in aymará means "the child of my eyes") if they come to visit. She also commented that she was not a great actress, that all she did was obey the director. After these brief observations she returned to the subject of the kitten and couldn't even remember that we had been in Denmark. Thank-you! With your permission we will read your letter on Saturday during the ceremony. A hug and best wishes to Eugenio and for success with your exceptional performances,
Juan and María

From: Julia Varley
Sent : Fri, 14 Jul 2006 13:19:34
To: Juan Cuevas
Subject: RE: María

Dear Juan,

Of course you can read the letter. Thinking of you, a strong, strong hug,
Ju

From: Juan Cuevas
Sent: 18 July 2006 15:27
To: j.varley
Subject: RE: María

Dear Julia,

I will tell you: there were about fifteen people altogether, counting relatives and friends, the priest and, of course, our Mamiña. And many flowers, so many flowers for María... María received the guests, not really knowing who they were, but her shy manner was sufficient to transform the situation. Depending on what seemed appropriate, she would ask: "How is the work going?" or "How is your wife?" or observe "That's how things go in our country". Everything was arranged nicely; the priest made a ceremonial entrance in his robes, which caused silent trepidation until he asked us all to take a seat. He welcomed

everyone in an affectionate way and then asked: "What would you like to say to María and Juan?" You know how Chileans are, not the kind of people to speak immediately, so the priest had to insist: "I know what I want to tell them, but what would *you* say?" Then the testimonies started until the priest himself asked one of his assistants to read out your letter. In that moment you were really there with María and me, and we held hands and María whispered in my ear: "They are our dearest friends, Julia and Eugenio". Julia, for a few seconds I could not restrain my tears. This gift of yours was wonderful.

Shortly afterwards the priest put the ceremonial questions and again María answered: "Yes, I promise to take care of Juan and love him for the rest of my days. And that we will keep on doing things together, as long as we agree!" This addition prompted applause. The priest brought the ceremony to an end and invited everyone to serve themselves ravioli and cake. Then we told stories, chatted, laughed, and indeed spent a day full of happiness.

Thank-you, Julia, and our love to Eugenio.

Juan

María's voice

The combination of naivety and insight, tenderness and decision in María has always impressed me. In particular I have always been moved by the intonation, rhythm and warmth in her voice that expresses all these characteristics. María had the confident voice of an actress who believed in the value of theatre. I felt a deep bond with her, admiring the simplicity with which she explained the history of her country and with which she dedicated a recording of poems to her family and dearest friends. On stage, her voice was a little rhetorical, like the voices of actors from other eras, but still she convinced me. She knew how to make one accept the illusion of theatre, transfiguring the exaltation of feelings and the excesses of theatricality. With disconcerting sincerity, she articulated sentences seething with love and passion that I would never dare enunciate. She affirmed that she had faith in the human being, while I often take refuge in the general scepticism that surrounds me. María's gift was to allow us who listened to her to believe in a better future, at least while her words lasted.

Every time I hear her particular Spanish accent, I am taken back to Chile, and to the shock of the military coup on the 11th of September 1973. While María is reciting love poems, I think of the years of desperation, hope, victory and disenchantment that also drove me, an actress making her first steps, to create a performance in Milan in 1974 with Teatro del Drago, before I joined Odin Teatret. Subsequently my thoughts wander to the coloured metal roofs of

Valparaíso; Allende's wife; the great love in the verses of the *Capitán*; the songs of Violeta Parra; the women of the *poblaciones* who plant flowers in front of their beaten-mud-floored huts; the community theatre schools for young people; the unadorned churches of the liberation theology priests; the multi-coloured murals; the pink flamingos of the Atacama desert; the Patagonian landscapes of Torres of the Paine; the bird that feeds its chicks in a nest on the rocks on the coast of the Magellan Straits; the terracotta and raffia sculptures in the market in Temuco; the snail shaped glacier that glides on the Grey Lake; the silence of the Valley of the Moon; the cable-car on the mountain of St. Cristobal; the lapis-lazuli jewels that I used in *Talabot*; the Mapuche songs; the story of the tortured woman who recognises the staircase of the jail where she had been kept blindfolded, as she steps down to the wine cellar of her newly bought house...

María died on the 27th of October 2006. A year later, while I was on tour in Montevideo, Juan arrived from Santiago and gave me the pearl-grey suit that María had worn when she received the National Prize of the Arts in Chile, to recite poems at the Transit Festival, and to get married for the second time a few months before dying. I felt a responsibility towards this inheritance, but I would never have been able to wear the suit: María was much smaller than me. I had had the good fortune to experience María's charm as an actress, her generosity and dedication to her craft, her need to take a stand that revealed itself in small actions. What could I do to ensure that her beauty would continue to exist and her wisdom to inspire? I decided to create a performance about her. The pearl-grey suit would be the first object in this performance.

Killing time

In September 2009, the director of Abraxa Teatro, Emilio Genazzini, invited me to a festival that he organised in a park in Rome. In the same period another friend, Bruno Bert, an Argentinian critic and director who lives in Mexico, asked me for some scenes featuring Mr Peanut, my skull-headed character, for the street theatre festival that he directed in Zacatecas. I put myself to work during the summer holidays. I took inspiration from a parade that I had prepared for the Holstebro Festuge (festive week). Mr Peanut changed his costume during the process: he turned from a man into a woman and then into a bride; from red to black and then to white, from happy to frightening and then to ritualistically solemn. I was also reminded of a *Theatrum Mundi* performance, *Ego Faust*: Mr Peanut, dressed as a bride, handed a stone to Marguerite with which she subsequently killed her child. In my cupboard I still had all the tiny dresses that reappeared in the last scene.



I prepared a sequence with recorded fragments from Gounod's opera *Faust*, using the changes of costume from the Festuge parade, and the stone and the tiny dresses from *Ego Faust*. In addition I introduced some of Mr Peanut's dances. I showed this montage of about half an hour to Eugenio Barba. It was two weeks before Emilio Genazzini's Festival in Rome and I needed the help of a director.

Eugenio reacted adversely to the music: he couldn't understand the singers' text; the music didn't have rhythm and didn't provoke any associations in him. He quickly left the room and asked Donald Kitt - an Odin Teatret actor who happened to pass by - to bring him some of his favourite music. One of Donald's CDs was by Miles Davis. We listened to some pieces of music and Eugenio chose one. He started to adapt the steps of one of my dances to the rhythm of this new music. Everything had to be terribly slow and I had to insert pauses after each step: an absolute novelty for me. With the habit of transforming weight into energy and of evaluating variations and changes of tension, I found it difficult to convey the feeling of fatigue that the director required of me. Death is exhausted, he repeated. I didn't succeed in thinking about Death's work load, only of my tasks as an actress. It was obvious that the director did not desire a dull tiredness, inanimate interruptions and a passive non-activity: I needed to create an expectation and engage my whole body. But I had to do so in a totally different way from usual.

The first day of our work together, as well as the music from *Faust*, Eugenio eliminated Mr Peanut's red costume that I had chosen for a scene with a waltz: it resembled images that had been seen previously. He chose Schubert's *Ave Maria* for the scene in which Mr Peanut was dressed as a bride. With this music I had to make an effort to do even the smallest movement extremely slowly, from doing up the skirt to putting on the veil, from the way of walking to the way of sitting, from the manipulation of the objects to loosening a long gilded thread. To save the woman in red and her speedy dance, I managed to convince Eugenio that a piece of music by the Penguin Coffee Orchestra made a good contrast to Miles Davis and Schubert. To the accompaniment of this music he asked me to improvise a sequence of housework - ironing, washing up, dusting, sweeping - always maintaining a playful way of walking and moving my hips.

Having changed the music, Eugenio asked me to hang up one of the baby dresses from *Ego Faust* that I had attacked with a stone in my proposal. So he tied a rope to make a clothesline and fetched some clothes-pegs. I didn't know what need Eugenio was trying to satisfy and what he had in mind. Perhaps he was only moving in the opposite direction, in response to the intuition that guides him when he does not know what to do, in an attempt to transform the seriousness of my story of Faust and Marguerite into something amusing. This is how the clothesline, the male and female underwear, an iron and an ironing board were introduced, as well as a doll and a small coffin. In other Odin Teatret performances Mr Peanut often presents himself with a baby skeleton: Death accompanied by its child. It is a convention that our spectators know. Nobody would expect a doll with human features to appear and then turn into a skeleton on this occasion. So Mr Peanut had to learn to behave like a mother: cuddling the doll, playing with it, dressing it and putting it to bed in the small coffin. It was not easy: I had to concentrate on not getting the costume tangled in the ironing board, the ironing board in the veils, the veils in my fingers, my fingers in the coffin lid, the coffin lid in the gilded thread that unrolled between my hands - always done extremely slowly and almost without being able to see anything.

After a week, the new montage of the three scenes - the man in black, the woman in red and the bride in white - became the performance *Killing Time - 17 minutes in the life of Mr Peanut*, in time to leave for Rome. I would never have imagined that it was also the beginning of *Ave Maria*.

Angels

Much earlier, in the winter of 2008, during rehearsals for the group production *The Chronic Life*, Eugenio had asked the actors to prepare a scene entitled "the

struggle with the angel". I decided that María Cánepa was my angel. I didn't fight with her. Instead I had the feeling that she was my guardian angel, always at my shoulder. She did so delicately, as when she was offering me food in her neat dining room in Santiago, or pretending that she was the one who needed protection when we worked together.

In his writings, Eugenio occasionally calls the actor "angel", perhaps precisely to underline the sense of a being with whom he has to fight in order to allow the form of a performance to emerge. Many anecdotes describe this confrontation and clash between actor and director. For example, Eugenio told me that if I wanted to tell María's story, I needed to give the task to another character and not represent her directly on stage. So, during the rehearsals of *The Chronic Life*, I spoke about María's life through the Uncle from America. I adapted some of the episodes her husband Juan had described to me for this male character I had created. The Uncle from America spoke about an emigrant to Chile, who was born in Italy and mad about theatre. In my new proposal, María became the blonde head of a puppet that turned into a small skull.

Every day I took into the working room two bags full of photographs of María, newspaper articles, poems, texts of songs in Spanish, Juan's letters, the CD of poems performed by María with the final dedication to her friends, biographies downloaded from the internet, articles of mine, notes of old ideas for a performance about voice, veiled women and gilded threads. The papers mixed with the cloths, scissors, playing cards and the Uncle from America's stories that sometimes related to the great Chilean actress. The material for what would finally become two different performances blurred. At the end, in developing a scenario for the character in *The Chronic Life* and the scene of the struggle with the angel, I had about an hour of material which was never used. For *The Chronic Life*, the Uncle from America turned into a woman, abandoned all references to Chile and to Spanish, and learned to speak Chechen. Finally only a few elements were used in *Ave Maria*: the recording in which María narrates her life and declaims two poems, and the pages of a newspaper from Santiago with two articles, one about her wedding and the other about her funeral, entitled "Endgame".

In addition a memory has remained: with reference to the day on which María's ashes were thrown into the Pacific Ocean, at the end of the scene of the struggle with the angel, I cut a ribbon, poured some drops of salt water on my feet and ended lying down on the ground. I remember this position every time in *Ave Maria* when I stretch out beside Mr Peanut, covered with the pages of the newspaper. Now the big hat forces me to keep my head up, rather than being able to lie down and rest on the bottom of the sea.



Photo: Tommy Bay

A result of all this work was that Eugenio became convinced that I was deeply motivated to create a performance about María Cánepa. I had expressed this wish many times, but during the three years when we laboured tirelessly as a group to complete *The Chronic Life* other tasks had taken priority. At the time Eugenio didn't say anything to me, but afterwards he confessed on various public occasions that my motivation provoked in him as a director the need to face once more the confrontation with the actor. As soon as it was possible he proposed that we should start working together.

The surprise for me was that the point of departure for the performance about María Cánepa was not the scene I had prepared, but the montage of the three versions of Mr Peanut in *Killing Time*. I found it hard to believe that a performance about María had anything to do with a Death figure that transforms from man to woman and bride, but I went on doing my best to follow and acknowledge the director's requests. I followed María's example: in the final part

of the poetry recording, while narrating her life, she affirmed that love received should only be repaid with love; that she had always worked, obeyed the director and interpreted roles, and that, after sixty years as an actress, if asked, she would do it all again.

I think that, in reality, Eugenio was fascinated by the challenge of measuring himself against the character of Death once more. Would he be able to surprise himself and the spectators? Or was it the quality of María's recorded voice that convinced him? I felt that María kept on protecting me like a guardian angel.

Neti-neti

Another work process had started, but the demands of the beginning continued to torment me. From the first day when Eugenio wanted me to follow the rhythm of Miles Davis' trumpet with an exasperating slowness, the repetition of *neti-neti* accompanied me until the end of rehearsals of the performance that, three years later, would be called *Ave Maria*.

To fix the relationship with the music, the different sequences of improvisations, the way of saying the text, the director guided me movement by movement and word for word. I repeated, but what I did was never right and I had to change continuously: one note of the music and a step, three notes and another step, a high tone and I lift the arm, a sequence of low notes and I turn my head to look... I lift my arm and I say three words of the text, I bend a finger and a word... The first sentence in a low tone, the second rising, the third slowly, the fourth with a pause... Many instructions for scenes of a few seconds, many *neti-neti* from the director for my constant attempts as an actress.

From: Julia Varley
Sent: 15. July 2012 13:02
To: Eugenio Barba
Subject: open rehearsal

I wanted to tell you about some of the reactions to the open rehearsal of *Ave Maria* at the Vertice Festival here in Brazil. I find it amusing that now, unlike the open rehearsal in Cardiff in August last year, everybody thinks that the performance is really about María Cánepa. The Chileans especially are moved and proud. Verónica Moraga told me how beautiful it was to see the scene of the woman in red; it was as if María now had a child and could have fun with it. Many asked about María, what bonded me to her. The final image impresses, but nobody mentions Death, not as a theme, nor as a character.

From: EB
Sent: 30. July 2012 18:11
To: Julia Varley
Subject: RE: open rehearsal

I suffer seeing you so distressed while we work on *Ave Maria*, but the blindfolded angel inside me (or the blind horse) knows the right direction, even if I don't know how to tell you this in words. It guides us towards a zen performance, and in the end the actress will be fond of the director again.

From: Julia Varley
Sent: 31. July 2012 15:54
To: EB
Subject: zen gardens

I am always fond of you, only the work is really hard. Unfortunately that the performance is good is not enough to want to do it! Another thought came to me this morning, while I was repeating the texts of *Ave Maria* in English and sunbathing: if the performance has to become a zen garden, is it really necessary to sow, grow and take care of a rich tropical garden to then eradicate all the plants? Would it not be better to gather pebbles? Is it really the suffering that the eradication causes that gives the zen quality to the garden?

From: EB
Sent: 31. July 2012 19:06
To: Julia Varley
Subject: RE: zen gardens

I am not speaking of zen gardens, but of a zen performance. I understand your pain in the process of what you call eradication. But if I should guide you towards something ineffable, difficult to explain and experienced as prayer, poetry and love, we can only follow the way of *NETI NETI*, not this, not the other.

From: Julia Varley
Sent: 1. August 2012 16:00
To: EB
Subject: RE: zen gardens

Neti Net? Can you explain to the ignorant?!

From: Eugenio Barba
Sent: 1. august 2012 19:43
To: Julia Varley
Subject: RE: zen gardens

NETI (Sanskrit) means No: in Hinduism it is the conceptual path to follow to reach the experience of the Supreme Being. Is God a horse? *NETI*. Is God a non-horse? *NETI*. Is God a donkey? *NETI*. Does God do good? *NETI*. Does God do evil? *NETI*. Julia does this. *NETI*. Julia does the other. *NETI*.

Workshops

For a few years, every December Eugenio and I give a workshop in the countryside outside Brasilia. The title is "The secret art of the actor" and it is organised by the director Luciana Martuchelli with her group YinsPiração. Every year we try to reveal to ourselves and the participants the particularities of theatre fiction, a process we call "to think in actions". Eugenio remembers the fundamental technical inventions that we have used in our work: Stanislavsky's segmentation; Meyerhold's behaviour that doesn't correspond to the text (the autonomous development of a physical score and of a vocal score that should subsequently be put together); and Odin Teatret's action reduction process.

During a session I exemplified the process of segmentation by lifting a chair. The sequence of actions was subdivided into kneeling, going towards the chair with my arms, grasping the chair legs with my hands, tightening my fingers, looking sideways, returning to a convenient position to lift the weight, lifting the chair and standing upright. I fixed the sequence with the chair, and then I repeated it without the object maintaining the variations and the tensions of the few actions that constituted it.

To demonstrate the expressive potential of this simple sequence, Eugenio asked me to improvise in front of the participants - improvise in the sense of making variations: I could change the volume of the actions, their rhythm, remain on one spot, use the whole room, direct myself to different points in space, explore every direction, go backwards and forwards in the sequence suddenly and then continue the sequence of actions, sometimes repeat some actions, execute them only with my torso, my face or hands, dance with an extroverted or introverted attitude, and follow different associations. The improvisation lasted about twenty minutes and was recorded on video. To the bewilderment of the participants, Eugenio asked me to learn it by heart.

It was not at all easy and it took me a long time. The changes of tension were continuous and tiny, dictated by the search for variation here and now, although what I was doing was only lifting a chair. I didn't have any image that could help me remember. I would read in my notes "I lift the left arm and then the right", "I bend to the right and look", "I make some steps and bend down", without managing to distinguish which part of the improvisation I was referring to. I was incapable of writing down the changes that were already difficult to recognise on the video. After having almost given up, I solved the task by learning the improvisation in general terms and adding, every time that I repeated it, the particular tension and energy of an improvisation executed for the first time. I transformed the actions into reactions to something I invented on the spot.

In the following sessions of the "The secret art of the actor" workshop in Brasilia and on other occasions teaching in public, Eugenio persisted in working on the improvisation with the chair. He was trying to develop my material as an actor in such a way that I didn't repeat my usual habits and mannerisms, in order to make a montage of scenes for *Ave Maria*. We were in the middle of an intense tour programme with *The Chronic Life*. We exploited the workshops in different parts of the world to secure some hours of work on the performance. Eugenio used the public situation to show the "complicity" or the "real" work of the actor with the director.

I had to adapt the improvisation of the chair to funeral march music, endlessly repeating the different ways of kneeling, stopping suddenly to look in different directions. I had to start again and again from the beginning to advance second by second and fix every action on the notes, inserting breaks and sudden accelerations. After various phases of elaboration, Eugenio gave me a photograph of María to hold and asked me to tear it up. Besides remembering the improvisation, how each action was fixed to the music, singing some passages with the music an octave higher and then lower and then laughing, I now had to pick up from the floor the many pieces of the photograph that I had torn. Five steps a piece of paper, eight steps two pieces... I had to throw them in the air, make two pellets of them in my fists, tread on them, and hide them behind my back... All of this while the only image that accompanied me was lifting a chair: a real torture!

To make examples for the participants of how to create actions starting from a text, I even transformed each word of a written script into a physical sequence, then each physical action into a vocal action, and each vocal action into a way of saying the text. At the end I had to dance the score to the rhythm of festive Brazilian music whilst remembering all the actions that succeeded each other very rapidly. I created new scenes using other texts as starting points, and I took inspiration from images to find vocal actions. Everything was improvised, fixed, repeated, put together and elaborated with objects and costumes in the



Photo: Tommy Bay

course of a few hours to show the workshop participants a whole creative process from the first steps until the first possible results. Working in public is useful, but very tiring. Something that can take months to be incorporated and elaborated during rehearsals, in public situations has to cohere in a few days to give the observer the feeling that, despite the bitterness, the path opens unexpected perspectives.

During another session of the "Secret art" outside Brasilia, Mozart's *Requiem* was the point of departure for a series of improvisations. Here the director required violence and strength. He was looking for solutions for the scene in which I removed Mr Peanut's mask. For a long time this scene broke the performance in two. The theatrical convention changed and there was a need to create continuity. Eugenio began, instead, by trying to underline this interruption. The director suggested to me images like "the death of St. Sebastian", "wild horses", "gladiators fighting". The results that I fixed left me breathless with effort. A year later the director asked me to transform these separate sequences into just one scene: the tenderness of a mother who protects her child. "You can reduce and change the rhythm," the director encouraged me. How could I explain to him that everything can be changed, except the essence of the action?

After the effort of creating, learning and changing, I ended up becoming fond of the incorporated material, but each time I had to accept starting again from the beginning, when almost everything was thrown away. After so many years of performances by myself and with the group, I was challenging myself not to repeat myself, but there is a fine balance between the need to find something new and feeling that one's own personality is completely annulled. For *Ave Maria* the collaboration between actress and director has been difficult, thorny, often painful. Instead of being of mutual stimulus, a lack of trust on both sides coloured the work process. The director enthusiastically proposed technical solutions that involved more and more objects, while I resisted, imagining what touring would be like in the future. The director protested against this censorship that limited his creativity, and I accused him of having become impatient and of wanting to take shortcuts.

I cried behind the veil that obscured my face in an effort to contain the impetuous desire to protest. But I was also happy that the veil and hat hid my expression, especially from the spectators who followed the process. As an actress, with the solo performances *The Castle of Holstebro* and *Doña Musica's Butterflies* I had established my autonomy. With *Ave Maria* I went back to being a beginner. It was as if the performance were built fragment for fragment through the minute instructions of the director, in a process that reminded me of my first performance with Odin Teatret, *Ashes of Brecht*. It was as if the wisdom of experience could only be revealed through accepting a return to the beginning.

The embrace

My beginning in theatre is marked by Chile. As a teenager I started to make theatre in Italy side by side with Latin American exiles. From them I learned the first techniques of the craft and together with them I approached Odin Teatret for the first time. In those years, when I still lived in Milan, one of my first performances was in protest against the military coup in Chile on the 11th of September 1973. Salvador Allende, August Pinochet, Victor Jara, the Inti Illimani, Pablo Neruda were all familiar names in my engagement as a young extra-parliamentarian left-wing political activist.

Mr Peanut also remembers Chile well: he went to give a piece of heart-shaped bread to the birds in front of the Moneda, the building where, on the day of the military coup in 1973, Salvador Allende died and where August Pinochet installed himself instead. Mr Peanut climbed over the fence around the lawn: he held the heart of bread high and started to crumble it. We didn't know that that same morning there had been a demonstration and that for this reason the riot police had been called in to the dictator's presidential building. Mr Peanut was thrown on the ground, hit and dragged away. They tried to tear off the mask that was tied under my chin and they carried me away lifting me by my hair and the stilts. Eugenio ran to my defence and he was also taken away. Only the intervention of some Chilean actor friends of ours, amongst whom was the well-known television actress Rebeca Ghigliotto, and of the Danish Embassy, extricated us from the police station. We managed to get the mask and costume back. After the fright, Death was again smiling in my arms. It was 1988 and the military regime was still in power.

In Teatro del Drago's performance about the military coup in Chile, in which I participated in 1974 in Milan, I wore a death mask at a certain point to represent the Chilean Christian Democratic party that supported the strike of the transporters who sabotaged Salvador Allende's government. Today, almost forty years later, *Ave Maria* takes me back to Chile with another death mask.

Who tells María's story? Can Death be a character who tells about life and its transformations? While the first spectators of *Ave Maria* are moved by María's gentleness and joy, I close my eyes under the veil and hat. The world tightens around me and becomes dark. I try to work, obey the director and interpret the role, listening to María's words. I hope that the layers of *neti neti* weave the veil of theatrical illusion and that gestures, silences and words make the spectators laugh and finally stay silent. I know that one day I will open my eyes again and reclaim energy from the space that surrounds me.

In the summer of 2012 I heard a lecture given by the Italian writer Erri de

Luca. He was talking about a poet from Sarajevo whose wife had died. In the love poems that he had dedicated to her there was this verse: "three billion women in the world and they are not you". And also "let me embrace you with this poem". If a poem is an embrace, a performance can also be one. In the performance *Ave Maria*, Salvador Allende and Pablo Neruda, Rebeca Ghigliotto and María Cánepa live again in me. They embrace me and I embrace them. The embrace is an illusion because it only lasts for the length of a performance that will disappear with me. But illusion is the art of theatre: give life to what is not there; bestow sound and presence to words on paper; allow those who are only memories to speak and act. To make a performance that keeps María alive is my current imperative illusion until it is my turn to be embraced by a lady whose face is veiled and who wears an elegant black hat.



Photo: Rina Skeel



Photo: Rina Skeel

María Cánepa

When I arrived at the church on the day of María's funeral, Juan Cuevas confronted me with a strange request from his deceased wife (who was rather absent-minded, yet very precise over details as befits an actress of her stature): I was to be the only speaker at her last appearance before an audience. "Why me, Juan?" I asked. "Honestly, I don't know", was his short reply as we entered the church crowded with important people.

I had known María since the day my school brought me to see *Fuenteovejuna* by Lope de Vega with her in the leading role. I still conserve that experience in my memory and my dreams: it was the reason why I later abandoned my psychology studies in favour of theatre. Hence my closeness to this marvellous woman, which unfolded through time, even after her death.

María was married to my teacher, Pedro Orthous, a beloved eminent director and founder of Teatro Experimental. After Pedro's death, María married Juan Cuevas, a student of mine, an assistant director and my companion in many important cultural adventures during General Pinochet's rule.

My story with the arts of communication, as they are now called, started with the inauguration of Teatro Antonio Varas at the University of Chile, a venue obtained after a long struggle to realise an artistic project in which Pedro and María participated. They had already succeeded in getting the State to finance, through the University, an ensemble of actors, directors, stage designers and technicians, allowing them to devote themselves entirely to their artistic work and perform regularly from Tuesday to Sunday. This happened in a country where educated people could not participate in a dinner, any social gathering or engage in a conversation with friends, if they had not seen the performances of Teatro Experimental, Teatro de Ensayo or of the commercial theatre companies. At that time in Chile theatre really meant something.

I was a teenager when I was admitted to the school of Teatro Experimental. I was selected for Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, directed by Pedro Orthous, which opened our theatre. The relationship with one's teacher was then almost

medieval, and apprentices had no pre-arranged schedule. I often had lunch at Pedro Orthous' house not far from the theatre. María was there too and, besides being a great actress and a beautiful and generous person, she was also a great expert in Piedmontese cuisine. Pedro, who was a director for forty-eight hours a day just as she was a full-time actress, reproached her when the colours of the salad did not match. He told her: "María, the lettuce doesn't go with the beetroot. You should use carrots because..." and he went on with a lesson of aesthetics which I noted in my memory. She used to answer: "Of course, Pedro", giving me an eloquent look, as if to say: "It is not always the form that matters most."

María was born with a vocation to serve, in fact she began to study as a social worker at the University of Chile. Then she realised that a more important social service could be offered to the community, and she decided to enlist herself in the theatre. Thus she performed her first *salto mortale*, a stunt which she repeated many times and would be one of her characteristics: constantly re-inventing herself and always looking for improvement.

María was already an elderly woman when the coup d'état transformed culture and art, and above all theatre, into something suspiciously mutinous, unhealthy and unpatriotic. While many theatre people left the country, she remained, founded an independent theatre and got to know Juan Cuevas as a stage companion. With him she started her own life again. She began from scratch with this new love and, without forgetting the previous one, she had the experience and the courage to love a person much younger than herself. Together they created Teatro Q, which became an important trench against the dictatorship. Once again María re-invented herself with an energy only extinguished by death.

Why did María want me to be the only speaker at her funeral? Because - and I am sure of this - she didn't want official honours and pompous speeches. She wanted to be spoken of as a person, with sincerity and affection. So I started confessing what I never dared to tell her while she was alive: in my adolescence I had loved her tenderly... But she was married to my teacher, as in twentieth century melodramas. And later I could not love her "because I have married one of your students - she would have said to me - as in the vaudevilles of the same century". And she would have collapsed with laughter!

María had the remarkable ability to laugh at herself. Above all, at her own absent-mindedness, which was extreme. Once she entered a big fashion store and saw a woman on the staircase. María moved to one side, but the woman also moved to the same side, then she moved to the left and the other woman did the same. After continuing like this for a while, María asked: "Señora, will you go first or shall I?" She kept on asking until she realised she was talking to a mirror.

At the end of her life, reality blended poetically with theatre. She

transformed a stay in hospital into a research process for a performance, field work for her character. She was pleased because she had learned a lot for her character as a nurse.

María's last outings aroused tenderness. While everyone was worried, not knowing where she had gone or at what time she had left, a taxi driver would bring her home. She had left early for an important rehearsal for a wonderful show at Teatro Antonio Varas. But Teatro Experimental, the company with which she had worked for so long, had not existed for years.

At the end of the funeral mass, Raúl Osorio, the present director of Teatro Antonio Varas, approached me and said: "Your speech was beautiful. However you should know that all thirty students of one of María's courses were hopelessly in love with her". "What idiots we have both been not to let her know, I answered. María would have laughed so much and been so happy to know it when she was alive."

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Photo: Tommy Bay

Half Human, Half Ghost

Techniques that are learned and a technique to elude techniques

When I say 'half human, half ghost', one's attention is attracted by the word ghost. In fact, we come across men and women all the time, but we don't often see ghosts. What does the image of a human being represent then, when it is also half ghost? The answer is simple: it is one of the ways to define the actor.

To clarify this thought, we have to step into a world in which ghosts are the point of departure, and human beings appear changeable and ephemeral.

In the years of the so-called Cold War, immediately after World War II, Korea lived through a bloody war. Today Seoul, the capital of the Republic of South Korea, is one of the world's most populated metropolises. The country is one of the planet's industrial powers, an outpost of high technology with a wealth developed since 1953 after the end of the conflict in which the Soviet Union and the United States confronted each other behind the screen of South Korea and North Korea. The feared planetary atomic apocalypse materialised in homeopathic doses in a war fought as in the old days, without the use of weapons of mass destruction. It was followed with yet greater ferocity by the Vietnam War, but always within the limits of old-fashioned massacres. But unlike Vietnam, South Korea emerged from it bloody, certainly, but stronger and richer.

One of the consequences of opening up to the western world and material growth was the search for its own cultural roots. The foundation of the Korean spiritual and national identity, which in the past was trampled on by Asian and western powers, was the shamanist tradition: the practices, rituals and beliefs which regulate the relationship between the dead and the living. This tradition, which also fed the resistance during the Japanese occupation for almost half a century, still thrived among the population.



Photo: Rina Skeel

In 1962, the Association for the Protection of Intangible Cultural Goods was founded with the aim of restraining the westernising process. Shamanism as an effective mass antidote was identified as a valuable means to resist the imported culture and the artistic manifestations of the western world. In 1988, the

Association for the Preservation of Shamanism started a series of activities to transmit the shamanistic thinking and vision with its dances, music, songs and rituals. The process of shaping classical models which had glorified dances and theatres in other Asian countries, in Korea was directly applied to a culture in close contact with popular beliefs and the realm of the dead. Theatres were invaded by shamanistic songs and dances.

The consequence was an interesting dramaturgical form inspired by the structure of shamanistic rituals. Performances conceived in this way took place in the open air and in closed spaces, even as agit-prop during the violent student manifestations for democracy. In 1988, on the occasion of the Olympic Games in Seoul, innumerable dance and dramatic shows presented such characteristics.

Three phases distinguish this particular dramaturgical form. At the beginning of the performance an actor sings and dances according to shamanistic rituality evoking the characters of the play (the other actors). These appear on the stage of the living, enact their story and, in the final part, are ritually dismissed by an actor who sends them back to the world of darkness from which they had risen.

Although many Koreans and foreigners appreciated this daring marriage between *wild thought* and modern *rational thought*, in most cases the strength of the performance was unbalanced. The performance's framework with the characters' evocation and dismissal was built according to the forms of a convention with the ritual's energetic dances and suggestive sonorities. But the central part, in which the actors interpreted the story of a contemporary or classical text, suffered from this comparison, and almost always exposed a tautological weakness: stage actions of a daily nature representing daily actions. The spectators had the clear feeling that, extrapolated from the shamanistic framework, the rest was insipid and self-referring theatre. Joseph Conrad had called it 'theatre of horror' - the horror of watching human beings pretending to be human beings.

Conrad's words against the London theatre of his time emphasise a spectator's discomfort in front of a performance whose limit is just *to communicate* yet remaining biologically inert: the actor doesn't succeed in *informing*, in giving a *living* form to her relationship with the spectator. It is not enough that the object of this relationship is recognisable or verisimilar. It needs *to move the spectators' senses*, allowing them to orientate themselves on the performance's possible narrative and associative horizons. Delving deeper into this relationship, the spectators should be able to establish a contact with their own experiences and with those of the contemporaneity as well as with the layers

of their archaic biology and the immovable time in their inner universe. A performance becomes form-in-life through the actor's language of signs impregnated by rhythmic, narrative and evocative energy, inducing a dialogue between the different natures of each spectator's mind. A theatrical relationship becomes alive when the signs of the actor's language, like minute points of acupuncture, radiate kinaesthetic, mnemonic, associative, instinctive and conceptual resonances. This happens with poetry when language separates itself from everyday prose. In the case of theatre, we could ask: what are the distinctive factors that, on stage, turn human behaviour into aesthetical and artistic communication?

The South Korean theatre tried a bold graft, but its good will was not supported by a sufficiently effective acting technique. This judgment stems from my direct experience. During the performance's shamanistic sections I felt enthused and driven by the actors' way of acting, their rhythm and energy conjugated in precise forms of intensified life in which I intuited a sense, but which also resounded in me when I was unable to grasp them. When the actors began to enact the play's characters, the sails almost always sagged, I could discern the route and the tide, but the wind's unpredictable strength had vanished.

The material presence of the ghost - of the character or the dead who returns - was built with the precision of a convention distinguishable from the predictability of daily behaviour. When the actor let the ghost/character enact situations from historical reality or artistic fiction, as a spectator I didn't sense the consistency and the shadow of the world, distant yet close to me, from which it had arrived. It was no longer a ghost and not yet an actor. It irremediably ended up becoming a human being pretending to be a human being.

The perfection with which the actor observes

The South Korean performances adopting shamanistic ritual conventions disclose one of the hidden problems in the art of theatre: first comes the Ghost, then the Actor. In other words, first comes the form, the artificial/artistic marionette, the void which is shaped and thus is ready to be haunted, inhabited: the mobile statue of a heroic or funny character. Then, in this marionette and in this statue, *life* is inserted: the animate power of the actor's person whom we spectators can watch as if she were one of us. In reality the actor's person preserves her mystery, she doesn't exhibit it: she has let the character swallow it. Thus, while we recognise that the actor is similar to us spectators, we also have to acknowledge she is in

no way similar to us. We ascertain the intensified life and the amplified sense of her actions. But we also see the ripples of gestures, intonations, actions, stillness and thoughts and it is as if these remained unknown to us.

The actor's 'as if' is a real process only if it provokes a similar 'as if' process in the spectator, one which is articulated and recognisable a posteriori just as that of the actor is built a priori.

Every time we try to define the genuine art of the actor we resort to entangled sentences, scientific explanations or poetic formulations. The same thing happens with a genuine wine which, as we all know, doesn't have an imaginary taste. It is so real that it intoxicates. But when we try to describe its taste, words become inadequate and float in the air like smoke, not because they point out something vague, but because we want to define an experience that is so elementary that we do not find elementary words.

When we begin to explore the actor's inner life, we climb or sink towards her spirit. Or, as a reaction, we deny that a spiritual problem exists and assert that what matters is the design's precision and the gestures' score. Two specular misunderstandings: the precision of the watch and the depth of the bathometer are equally inert elements. The actor becomes a body-in-life through mystery, technique and spirit of observation.

Bertolt Brecht, in his speech to the Danish actor-workers, expressed it with words that could be those of Stanislavski or any experienced performer: the actor, before every other ability, must possess the art of observing. It doesn't matter how she is seen, what she has seen and shows. What she knows deserves to be seen. We observe her in order to see the perfection with which she has observed.

Techniques that are learned and a technique to elude techniques

The South Korean example, under the aegis of shamanism and *p'ansori*, helps to clarify some of those aspects which always made the grafting of the Asian dance-theatres onto Western theatres problematic. The difficulty of this grafting has its roots in a contradiction: the distance between those techniques which are learned and what we could call a technique which tries to elude techniques.

A close examination of our craft's history makes it easy to ascertain that European theatres have often used mannered behaviours, characterisations, clichés and scenic know-how. But the actors have always avoided codified body techniques like those which we find in the field of singing, dance, acrobatic or martial arts.

It is difficult to establish the existence of a tradition without real assessable techniques. These techniques must be identical for all those who practice the same kind of theatre, with the possibility of being diversified in well organised sub-genres, thus establishing a quality standard with a scale of values to measure excellence and significance. It is arbitrary to establish a dialogue without real assessable techniques. Two different traditions can communicate with each other, may find points of contact, interlacements and even a symbiosis. But this is impossible in a meeting between a commensurable technical tradition and another one which programmatically escapes from a strict definition.

In the twentieth century, European actors and directors have often expressed this impossibility and regretted the absence of solid acting techniques comparable to those of dance, song, music and Asian traditional theatres. They have voiced their longing for the existence of *forms* independent of the actors who should enliven them.

But we can envisage the absence of well-defined techniques as a fascinating adventure, and not as the symptom of a lack. I believe that we would end up finding within the stage ghost - or the character - *the actor's difference*.

Since the end of the nineteenth century various directors, starting with Stanislavski, realised in their practice something which had never happened in the history of European theatre: they tried to define in a detailed way the fundamental techniques of the actor's art with a view to a pedagogy with foundations similar to those of other performing arts: song, dance or pantomime. On looking more closely, however, the techniques of the European theatre reformers were completely different from the other 'techniques', which having once established their point of arrival - the excellence of a form at which they aim - look for suitable means to reach it. The reformers' techniques were rather attempts to analyse personal strategies and procedures. The question they tried to answer was '*what do I do when I do what I am doing?*', and not '*what and how you should learn to do, if you want to adhere to this or that artistic convention?*'

The technique which eludes techniques looks for challenges and the adventure of the solitary artist, neglecting the nobility of Tradition in order to discover the shock of an unexpected invention, and accepting to be surrounded by the craft's mediocrity. It is not an insufficiency of the western theatre, it has become the feature of every form of contemporary theatre in any continent. And it involves an abnormal peculiarity - abnormal when observed in the context of the performing arts which have been codified by the various civilisations of our planet.

The dance between the two halves - the half actor and the half ghost - is a test which may generate an unpredictable result. This challenge doesn't consist in the arduous ascent to embody to perfection an artistic form. It is similar to the struggle between two momentary adversaries: the character's ghost and the actor's person. It is reminiscent of the struggle between Jacob and the Angel, one of the western culture's founding myths which the Old Testament has passed on to us. Yet in contemporary theatre the actor cannot always affirm after a performance: I challenged a ghost and was not defeated.

Translated from Italian by Judy Barba



Photo: Rina Skeel

Text of the performance

I

María Cánepa: born the first of November 1921, died the 27th of October 2006. You turn around in your small space. You are becoming sea that does not know it is sea. The abyss is your future. Oh, how nice to see you!

This morning some actors came to visit me. I had never seen them before. They were dressed in mourning to approach me better, while I am always in a good mood, happy like a sparrow that flies over the ruins. The actors stared at me with desperate eyes. They were turning their loss into pain. Perhaps they were already thinking of using their pain for a future character.

At the end I let myself be moved by the tears of those poor old actors and I had fun trying to cheer them up. I grabbed their hands, I caressed their faces and I looked at them tenderly.

Now I am alone in this room where nothing moves. Within me I feel fatigue for the effects of the tragi-comedy that I represented this morning. It could be that the dead actress so loved by her colleagues has found a new life. I don't know. Who could know? Perhaps it is only an illusion.

II

There are moments in which I feel divided in two. A foreign presence stirs within me as if I had a twin, as if we were only one body. This sister buried in me is María.

María is the cobweb and I am the fly. María comes and goes between what she is and what she isn't. She scatters thoughts in my mind, sows words in my mouth, thinks with my eyes. I see her, I touch her, I embrace her. And María dissolves. María, let me hear your voice. Say something, María. Be serious, come on now!

III

What does one love when one loves?

The terrible light of life? Or the light of death?

What does one search for? What does one find? What

is this? Love? Who is it? The woman with her depth, her roses, her volcanoes,

or this coloured sun that is my furious blood

when I enter in her until the last roots?

Or is it all a game, my God, and there is no woman,
nor man, but only one body: yours,
split into stars of beauty, into fleeting particles
of visible eternity?
I would die for this, oh God, in this war
of going and coming in between roads
and not being able to love three-hundred all at once
because I am always condemned to one,
to this one, this only one, that you gave me in the old paradise.

(Gonzalo Rojas : *What Does One Love When One Loves?*)

IV

It happened at the time when the animals spoke, and I was pure of body and soul. In a badly lit small suburban square there was a circus. A blonde child worked on the trapeze with his parents. I found him irresistible: the first love of my life. The love of a mother. It is this love that allows me to bear the trials I undergo every day in this place.

The first love of my life, the blonde child that fell from the trapeze, and my last daughter, María, helped me dissipate the curtain of smoke that surrounds the mystery of this international hotel in which I live. It is not a five star hotel but a waiting room, with electricity and music.

This morning they took me to a room where there was only a chair. I immediately ascertained that it was not an electric chair but a bed. They lay me down on this bed, completely naked. Men and women elegantly dressed in white crowned me with a steel helmet from which sprouted two long electric flowers. And they tied me up.

What could I say? They had put a rag in my mouth. They turned a lever in a cupboard in the wall. And a star came down from space and landed in my skull. I turned into a body of ice. But I cannot die.

I found myself in the bed of my room of the false international hotel. I was thinking of you, María. Three hundred steps in a few instants. Stone skin upon your head. Welcome. Ave María.

Now I ask: what terribly important secret do they want to tear out of me with force without the consent of a court or the comfort of a confessor? Why do they attack me so furiously with all their technology? They know very well that I am the delegate of an absolute power that has given me the task of putting everyone to sleep for ever: children, adults and old people.

V

María always devoted herself to her job, at first as a social worker. Then she devoted her life to theatre. She acted for sixty years. She understood that art is an act of love, a meeting with the spectators. Without encounter there is no art or artist. Theatre was her life choice because theatre is generous. She risked dying. In her delirium she always spoke of theatre, but not always because her heart also beat for two other loves: Pedro, her beloved, who taught her the rigour of the craft, and her second husband Juan, with his great dignity. She worked, obeyed the director and interpreted roles. If they asked her, she would do it all again. She had faith in a more harmonious life. Despite everything she never lost faith in the human being.

María has thanked for the affection that surrounded her. Her parents taught her that the love received must be paid back with love. Now María rests in my arms. She cares for me and her feelings are expressed through this poem by Pablo Neruda.

It pleases me your silence because it is as though you are absent,
You hear me from afar, and my voice cannot touch you.
It seems that your eyes have flown away,
and that a kiss has sealed your mouth.

As all things are filled by my soul,
You emerge from such things filled with my soul.
Butterfly of dreams, you are like my soul
And you are like the word melancholy.

It pleases me your silence and that you are distant.
It is as though you are saddened, butterfly of lullabies,
and you hear me from afar, and my voice cannot reach you.
Let me grow still with your silence.

Let me speak to you with your silence;
It is clear like a light, simple like a ring.
You are as the night, silent and with eyes of stars.
Your silence is like a star's, so far away and so shy.

It pleases me your silence because it is as though you are absent,
Distant and anguished as if you had died.
A word then, a smile is enough.
And I am glad, glad that it is not so.

Poema 15

Me gustas cuando callas porque estás como ausente,
y me oyes desde lejos, y mi voz no te toca.
Parece que los ojos se te hubieran volado
y parece que un beso te cerrara la boca.

Como todas las cosas están llenas de mi alma
emerges de las cosas, llena del alma mía.
Mariposa de sueño, te pareces a mi alma,
y te pareces a la palabra melancolía;

Me gustas cuando callas y estás como distante.
Y estás como quejándote, mariposa en arrullo.
Y me oyes desde lejos, y mi voz no te alcanza:
déjame que me calle con el silencio tuyo.

Déjame que te hable también con tu silencio
claro como una lámpara, simple como un anillo.
Eres como la noche, callada y constelada.
Tu silencio es de estrella, tan lejano y sencillo.

Me gustas cuando callas porque estás como ausente.
Distante y dolorosa como si hubieras muerto.
Una palabra entonces, una sonrisa bastan.
Y estoy alegre, alegre de que no sea cierto.

Pablo Neruda



Photo: Tommy Bay



Photo: Rina Skeel

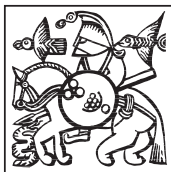
ODIN TEATRET - NORDISK TEATERLABORATORIUM

Odin Teatret was created in Oslo, Norway, in 1964, and moved to Holstebro (Denmark) in 1966, changing its name to Nordic Theatre Laboratory/Odin Teatret. Today, its members come from a dozen countries and three continents.

The Laboratory's activities include: Odin's own productions presented on site and on tour in Denmark and abroad; "bartering" with various milieus in Holstebro and elsewhere; organisation of encounters for theatre groups; hosting other theatre groups and ensembles; teaching activity in Denmark and abroad; the annual Odin Week Festival; publication of magazines and books; production of didactic films and videos; research into theatre anthropology during the sessions of ISTA (the International School of Theatre Anthropology); periodic performances with the multicultural Theatrum Mundi Ensemble; collaboration with the CTLS, Centre for Theatre Laboratory Studies of the University of Århus; the Festuge (Festive Week) in Holstebro; the triennial festival Transit devoted to women in theatre; children's performances, exhibitions, concerts, round tables, cultural initiatives and community work in Holstebro and the surrounding region.

Odin Teatret's 49 years as a laboratory have resulted in the growth of a professional and scholarly milieu characterised by cross-disciplinary endeavours and international collaboration. One field of research is ISTA (International School of Theatre Anthropology) which since 1979 has become a performers' village where actors and dancers meet with scholars to compare and scrutinise the technical foundations of their scenic presence. Another field of action is the Theatrum Mundi Ensemble which, since the early 1980s, presents performances with a permanent core of artists from many professional traditions.

Odin Teatret has so far created 76 performances, performed in 63 countries and different social contexts. In the course of these experiences, a specific Odin culture has grown, founded on cultural diversity and the practice of "barter": Odin actors present themselves through their work to a particular milieu which, in return, replies with songs, music and dances from its own local culture. The barter is an exchange of cultural manifestations and offers not only an insight into the other's forms of expression, but is equally a social interaction which defies prejudices, linguistic difficulties and differences in thinking, judging and behaving.



ODIN TEATRET

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