

Odin Teatret

A Character that Cannot Die



A CHARACTER THAT CANNOT DIE

Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium - Odin Teatret
Saerkaerparken 144, 7500 Holstebro, Denmark
odin@odinteatret.dk
+45 - 97424777
<https://odinteatret.dk/>

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A CHARACTER THAT CANNOT DIE

A biography of Mr Peanut

Dedicated to Marco Donati, Mette Jensen and Velda Noli

With and by **Julia Varley**

Film by **Claudio Coloberti**

Directed by **Eugenio Barba**

Video and photos from Odin Teatret Archives by: Tommy Bay, Fiora Bemporad, Claudio Coloberti, Exe Christoffersen, Chiara Crupi, Tony D'Urso, John Dinesen, Francesco Galli, Edgar House, Torben Huss, Else Marie Laukvik, Egidio Luisi, Jan Rűsz, Rina Skeel, Peter Sykes, Torgeir Wethal

**Death presents Mr Peanut,
the character that for fifty years has participated
in many of Odin Teatret's performances.
Mr Peanut reveals her/his secret:
s/he cannot die, only change form.
S/he enacts a flow of mutations
through dances, poems, photos and films
evoking meetings, travels, adventures and landscapes
of a long life.**

Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium / Odin Teatret production.
Holstebro, Denmark, 2019



Photo: Tommy Bay

About the performance

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A biography of Mr Peanut

Death is the curve of the road. Dying is just not being seen. Earth is made of sky. Nobody ever got lost. Everything is truth and passage.

Fernando Pessoa

Love and Death are the two outermost experiences in our lives. They embrace each other and remind us that the poets call the acme of carnal union 'small death'.

Where does Death live when we don't see it? In ourselves? Is our body its body? In which appearances and forms does it appear to us? Can Death seduce us? Make us laugh? Can Death fall in love and make us fall in love? What truth blooms when we meet it?

Theatre is vision: a performance craves to show the invisible. *Character that Cannot Die* imagines and materialises births, adventures, deaths and resurrections of Mr Peanut, the character with a skull head, who has participated for over fifty years in Odin Teatret's performances, often as a protagonist.

The performance is a love declaration by the actress to the character she has given life to. In noisy streets and silent rooms Julia Varley reveals to us Mr Peanut's many grotesque, tragic, but also lively incarnations during his journey on this planet.

Theatre scenes, dances and film extracts alternate to evoke events from the past and imagine a future reality that awaits us. The essence of this reality is a dance of opposites in which pain and absence include tenderness, poetry and regeneration.

SCENARIO

- Scene 1 Mr Peanut welcomes the spectator
- Scene 2 Life is not a joke
- Scene 3 Catching butterflies, fighting Death
FILM: "I am just around the corner"
- Scene 4 Erotic dream
- Scene 5 Dance with me to the end of our love



Julia Varley

MR PEANUT'S LIFE IN THEATRE

Mr Peanut is an archetypal character of Odin Teatret. He is a character that cannot die. His skull-like head identifies him as Death. He was born slowly, but then it was as if he had always existed. Mr Peanut has taken different forms, he has dressed as a woman and as a man, he has participated in many of Odin Teatret's performances.



Mr Peanut has been 200 metres underground in a Welsh mine. He has slipped on the snow in Sweden, danced in Hamburg's port district, with the communist militants of the "Feste dell'Unità" in Italy and with the Catholic activists of the Chilean *poblaciones*. He was violently attacked by a terrified woman in Oslo and he founded a club in Wales with children who all walk on stilts like him. He has played football in Montevideo, ridden an elephant in München, learned to play children's games on the beaches of the Yucatan and there, on the sand, he learned to fall and then to get back up on his feet.

Mr Peanut has visited newspapers, beaches, supermarkets, libraries, churches, television studios, factories, swimming pools, hospitals, airports, stadiums, markets, schools, theatres, museums, prisons, barracks and mayors' offices. In each city Mr Peanut has stolen hats from policemen, glasses from teachers, ice-creams from ice-cream sellers, he has admired the breasts of beautiful women, visited ambassadors and ministers, the powerful and those who suffer their power. He has walked on the Brooklyn Bridge in New York when the twin towers still existed, and Berlin was still divided by a wall.



Mr Peanut was born in 1976. In the beginning he was a tall, heavy skeleton that danced in the air hanging from a long pole. He accompanied Odin Teatret's first street parades. In the film we see him during the barter organised by the Santa Marta Social Centre in Milan, where I, Julia Varley, saw Odin Teatret's *Book of Dances* for the first time, and decided to follow the group to Denmark to learn. I am still there. I have worked as an actress at Odin Teatret since 1976.



In 1977, Tom Fjordefalk, an actor who walked on stilts, put a skull on his head. Tom lent his body to Death. One of his first parades was along Barcelona's *Rambla* and *Barrio chino*.

It was Tom who gave the name of Mr Peanut to this character. The head's shape resembled a peanut and was indirectly reminiscent of a rich peanut farmer who was then President of the United States.



Mr Peanut became one of the characters of *Anabasis*, Odin Teatret's street performance. *Anabasis* travelled the streets of the world heading towards the sea with its 'army' of actors. The characters in colourful costumes stopped in the squares and at crossroads and presented dances and battle scenes, to the sound of drums and trumpets.



In the end, Mr Peanut, together with the character of the Androgyne on stilts, imprisoned all the actors in a large black cloth.

With *Anabasis* Mr Peanut has visited many countries. One of the first trips was to Peru in 1978. He ventured into the neighborhoods where tourists did not dare to go on the outskirts of Ayacucho in the Andes. There Mr Peanut and his companions were called *gringos gigantes*. And he rested in front of the cliff that descended towards the Pacific Ocean in Lima.



Mr Peanut has a child: a small skeleton that at first was attached to Silvia Ricciardelli's drum, also in the street performance *Anabasis*, and then appeared in Iben Nagel Rasmussen's arms in the performance *The Million*. Later it emerged from an egg to dance to the rhythm of *Xica da Silva* in the performance *Ode to Progress*, and from a small coffin in the performance *Ave Maria*.



In 1980 Mr Peanut changed character. In order to no longer play the big drum in *Anabasis I - Julia* - was willing to challenge my vertigo and try the high stilts. I had inherited Mr Peanut from Tom and his head was now fixed on mine.



Mr Peanut changed: his long legs were adorned with feathers, the black tailcoat was embellished with white gloves, an embroidered shirt and a red silk scarf around his neck. He began using a pocket watch, a comb and a long stick. Death wiggled his bum and was playful and cheeky.

Mr Peanut is not Death for me, but a character full of life. Shaking hands with all the children of Holstebro is one of the experiences that has most marked my development as an actress.



Mr Peanut continued to travel the world. For more than 40 years he has participated in Odin Teatret's barter, mixing with the *burakumin*, the pariahs, of Osaka and the girls of Amsterdam's red-light district.

He bought souvenirs at the market in Guadalupe in Mexico and raised money with street children in Bogotá.

And when, still in Colombia, they saw him return to the village of Raquira, where Odin Teatret had done a barter some years before, they thought that he was the one who had brought the rain that day and they made offerings to him: guavas and avocados.

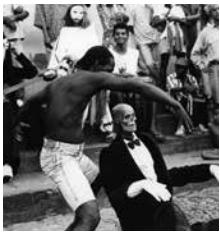


In Caracas, Venezuela, Mr Peanut participated in a barter in front of the city prison. The inmates watched from the windows and at the end of the performance they threw messages to be transmitted to their families. The prison seemed to be very crowded: many faces looked at us from the same window.



In Montevideo, in 1986, in the ruined square of Ansina, the old black neighbourhood, Mr Peanut did his first striptease to the rhythm of candombe drums, transforming himself from a man in tails to a woman who danced with a coloured miniskirt. We returned a few years later for another barter, and then again, when the square had become a modern residential neighbourhood and there was no longer space for theatre.





In Salvador de Bahia, Mr Peanut conversed with Augusto Omolú and his dances of the orixá, divinities of African origin. A few years later Augusto became an actor at Odin Teatret.



The photos of Tony D’Urso show Mr Peanut, with a heart-shaped loaf of bread, advancing towards the presidential palace of the Moneda in Santiago, where Salvador Allende had died. It was in 1988 and General Augusto Pinochet was still in power in Chile. The police dragged me by my hair to a police-van, with the stilts still attached to my legs. The intervention of the Danish Embassy and one of our organisers, Rebeca Ghigliotto, a famous Chilean actress, was decisive to get Mr Peanut’s costume and head back, so that they didn’t stay in Chile forever.



In 1983 Odin Teatret was in New York with the performance *Brecht’s Ashes*, invited by the theatre of La Mama. During the mornings off, Mr Peanut visited Central Park to greet the statue of Hans Christian Andersen. He was brusquely stopped in the East Village by a policeman who only wanted to take his photograph. He walked the streets surrounded by skyscrapers that looked like cathedrals and trembled on the Brooklyn Bridge from the vibrations of the cars that drove speedily underneath.



We were in the famous Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires for a demonstration against a new military coup attempt in 1987. The military wanted to avoid the trials for the enforced disappearances during the dictatorship. Mr Peanut carried an impromptu sign made from a drum cover, embroidered with “Olvido?” (Oblivion?), holding it above a sea of people.



We arrived in a bus without doors to the stadium of Havana’s psychiatric hospital for a barter involving patients and a group of children. Mr Peanut did his dance from the performance *Ode to Progress*.



Every ten years, from 1978 to 2018, Mr Peanut has visited Ayacucho, the town in the Andes at the epicentre of the war between the Peruvian army and the Shining Path. At each visit it was a tradition to take a group photograph in the Plaza de Armas in front of the monument to General Sucre. After the visit in 1998, I had to confess that my legs could no longer cope with the weight of the stilts, so Mr Peanut gave up his traditional height, and from that moment on he appeared on foot in many of Odin Teatret’s performances. In 2018 the Mayor of Ayacucho knelt in front of Mr Peanut, promising that the city would always welcome group theatre encounters.



In 2004 we celebrated Odin Teatret’s 40th anniversary in Holstebro. Mr Peanut, with a group of guests holding a rope, led the way to the town hall to attend the wedding ceremony between Odin Teatret, personified by the Trickster in a wedding dress, and the city, personified by the Mayor. He didn’t know how hard it was to pull fifty people holding a rope in the rain.



For years Mr Peanut was the identity behind which I could reveal and hide myself. For my first solo performance, *The Castle of Holstebro*, I chose Mr Peanut to speak for me. In the end it was he who forced me to speak. So, with him, I dialogue with myself. In the first version of this performance, created in 1990, Mr Peanut had stilts. In 1999, for a second version, prepared for a smaller space and without stilts, I wrote:

*Dear Mr Peanut,
Now, after being a giant, you look like a dwarf in your shortened trousers. As we get older, instead of growing, we become smaller. Together we found a piece of coral in the ocean: “Of his bones are coral made”. Of his and her bones. Our wish has been granted: the girl dressed in white and the man in tails with a skull head are now one and the same person. In the secret room of The Castle of Holstebro 2 we are united as never before.
Lots of love,
Julia*



Photos: Tommy Bay





Doña Musica is another character of mine who still accompanies me today. Mr Peanut managed to slip into her garden and become one of the butterflies in the final scene of *Doña Musica's Butterflies*, a performance created in 1997.



In 1989, Odin Teatret celebrated its 25th anniversary by thanking the city of Holstebro which had welcomed the foreign actors in 1966. Since then, every two or three years, we organise a Festuge, a Festive Week, consisting of nine days and nights of continuous theatricalisation of the town's everyday life. In 1991, for the Festuge entitled "The Danish Columbus", the theatre director Kirsten Delholm had a boat built on the roof of a supermarket. At the end, the boat was buried in the park, and a tree was planted on top. Mr Peanut and the Teatro tascabile of Bergamo attended the ceremony. During the 2005 Festuge, entitled "The Splendour of the Ages", Mr Peanut discovered how to change from a red dress to black tails and then into a white bride. For the 2017 Festuge, "The Wild West: Roots and Shoots", Mr Peanut allied himself with the centaurs of the Théâtre du Centaure from Marseille.



Mr Peanut is always ready to go out on the most diverse occasions to represent Odin Teatret and welcome those who come to visit us.



Odin Teatret's 50th anniversary was celebrated during the 2014 Festuge, entitled "Faces of the Future - Ghosts and Fictions". Mr Peanut dressed in Tyrolean style. He was part of the Mercurial Family, together with the masks of Deborah Hunt, Carolina Pizarro and Francesca Palombo, and Fabio Butera's puppets. We put the future on sale.



Mr Peanut's most complex performance is *Ave Maria*, created in 2012: a ceremony made by Death to commemorate the Chilean actress María Cánepa. It all started with *Killing Time - 17 Minutes of Mr Peanut's Life*, a challenge in finding new behaviours of the character who had already



experienced everything. Mr Peanut entered like a tired farmer who returns home with his crop and ended like the Virgin with child holding a little horse instead of a sceptre.



In *Ode to Progress*, Mr Peanut leads the 'hidden people' of the elves who will eventually succumb to a hunter and his infallible gun. Even Mr Peanut - Death - will have to pretend to die, to be resurrected in the next performance.



The Theatrum Mundi is the ensemble formed by dancers, actors and musicians of ISTA, the International School of Theatre Anthropology. At the end of each ISTA session, the Theatrum Mundi presented a performance composed of scenes from different traditions in which Mr Peanut played different parts. Being on stage together with Asian and Afro-Brazilian masks, actors, music, rhythms, characters and dances, contributed greatly to enrich Mr Peanut's story.



In *Ego Faust*, Mr Peanut assisted Kanichi Hanayagi during the *hikinuki*, the sudden change of costume from the red to the white kimono, which occurred after Margarete had killed her newborn baby.



A final banquet and an invasion of "monsters" introduced the scene closest to Mr Peanut's heart. I choose this scene to end the story of the character that cannot die: the transformation of Death into a newborn baby in the arms of a woman at the feet of the Indian dancer Sanjukta Panigrahi.

Sanjukta concluded her liberating dance of Moksha swaying slightly. I looked up at Sanjukta to see how, shuddering, she showed the whites of her eyes. It was as if her soul left her body to reverberate in the memory of the spectators and in the newborn baby smiling in my arms.

THE RISK OF THE SPECTATOR

Highlighting the inexplicable: here you have one of the justifications of theatre.

The dead always take up a lot of space. They suddenly grow, fill the house, invade our minds, guide our acts: people and ideas, ideals and faiths, illusions and certainties. So many dead live in us!

The dead reawaken in theatre, they sing, dance, evoke the past which is your present and future. As a spectator, it is time to rediscover the extreme lightness of matter, like a bird gliding through the air: a motionless flight.

Be confident and be cradled by their stories of horror, poetry and ugliness. Be strong, close the eyes of your understanding and enhance those of your senses and memory.

Enter the performance as a hunter ambushing a prey, ready to pursue it.

Beware: it's the prey that pursues you.

The outcome of the hunt does not depend on intelligence and knowledge. The result is entrusted to your ability to renounce understanding. Let the memory of your senses discover an intimate link with the silence within yourself. Behind the veil of stories, seize the fiction's life and feel its breath:

movements love-hate each other;

space dissolving into images and echoes;

time interlacing discordant rhythms;

simultaneity and progression are Siamese twins;

unpredictable gestures and the disturbing transparency of a gaze.

Live, as a spectator, the same trepidation as your prey which is pushing you into a fictional forest where the paths lead elsewhere. The only certainty is the uselessness of this hunt in which you risk meeting yourself and the pleasure of incomprehension.

Enormous is the effort to be obliged to mean something. The performance's black radiance is not an enigma, but a mystery. Like life. What you see is made up of what is invisible. That which is perceptible has a hidden skeleton.

Emotion lasts less than memory. Don't waste it on words mute like snow.

The actors are bees that carry pollen from one wound to another. In theatre, what should always prevail is the human: the spectator.



Photo: Fiora Bemporad

ODIN TEATRET - NORDISK TEATERLABORATORIUM

Odin Teatret/Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium's activities include: Odin's own productions presented on site and on tour in Denmark and abroad; "barter" 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 (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; the yearly NTL Festival; OTA, the living archives of Odin Teatret's memory; WIN, Workout for Intercultural Navigators; artists in residence; co-productions; children's performances; exhibitions; concerts; round tables; cultural initiatives; transformative processes and community work in Holstebro and the surrounding region.

Odin Teatret's activities as a laboratory since 1964 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. Under the name of Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium, younger artists and groups that are closely connected to Odin Teatret's history and experience develop their artistic autonomy in the form of residencies, co-productions and local activities.

Odin Teatret has so far created 79 performances, performed in 66 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.