

Graciela Ferrari

Ready to Drink in Every Word

Now her pupil, I never mentioned the fact that I was the girl who had provided her with the book, nor did she ever remember. But to say casually "now her pupil" is minimising and carelessly passing by one of the most important events in my life, the meeting with my master, María Escudero.

When I was twenty years old, theatre was a distant and fascinating world, done by others, while I was studying to be a teacher at the National University of Cordoba. A friend of mine studied stage design in another faculty, and, because of this, to me he seemed to be both strange and lucky. He used to talk a lot about one of his professors, a woman who taught a subject called Theatre Practice. Despite the fact that this course was not important to him, the woman dominated my friend's thoughts and he often mentioned her with a mixture of admiration and criticism. She was special, and surely even stranger than he. Around that time, I happened to see a programme on local television during which his professor was being interviewed: she was indeed remarkable. It was as though she was devouring the interviewer with her eyes, she emanated a light different from anybody I knew and said unusual things; to me she definitely seemed to be an extraordinary person.

Some time later, I went into a bookshop and there she was, asking for a play written by an author from Mendoza, a rare volume unknown to the bookseller. But I knew the book: I had it at home; my mother had brought it from Mendoza after one of her business trips. My friend's professor could not hide her disappointment at not finding the book and said something like, "this was the last bookshop I could try". My heart jumped and raced. This strange woman, belonging to a world inaccessible to me - family tradition imposed careers in serious professions - was there talking a few metres from me, looking for something she needed and that I possessed. I do not know where I found the courage - that impulse that at times makes shy people daring - but I went up to her and said, "Madame, I have got the book you are looking for". She looked at me with no particular expression on her face, with round fixed eyes under the curls falling on her forehead, and she replied: "Oh really! You have it?" I do not remember the rest of the conversation, but I mentioned her student and we agreed that I would send her the book with him. And so I

did: I sent the book, and nothing more happened.

A couple of years later, I took the final exam for my degree as a teacher, crossed the road and enrolled in the acting course she taught at the theatre school. Now her pupil, I never mentioned the fact that I was the girl who had provided her with the book, nor did she ever remember. But to say casually "now her pupil" is minimising and carelessly passing by one of the most important events in my life, the meeting with my master, María Escudero.

I remember the first year at the theatre school as luminous as it really was. Everything was possible: we were part of a world which was inside and at the same time apart from the other so-called real world. How to explain this? Theatre was made of those stiff and ridiculous actors who acted a part and did not seem real, spoke like mechanical puppets and imitated real people on stage. But there, where María gave her classes, theatre began to be something we were inventing every day. That is it: we were the theatre! In hindsight, long afterwards, I could see that the way that María convinced us that nothing had existed before us, might be criticised as a basic pedagogical principle. But this was how we were born into another universe, into a dimension of learning and an experience of training that set us on an original, powerful and rebellious pathway: if anyone arrived there with some certainties, there was no way of holding on to them. Everything was new and stimulating: to play, invent, be ourselves and go beyond the limits that we learned existed; things were mixed together and juxtaposed leaving us neither calm nor anxious. It was a continuous state of discovery, like a series of enlightenments.

All of this was happening, during the first year in the theatre school, in 1969, a time of social and personal revolt, when

the political ideas of the anarchist, left wing movement seemed to mirror the revolution taking place at the core of each of us. I speak of us because the following year María was fired from the theatre school and we - her most addicted pupils - freely left the academic environment to go with her. We worked in her sitting-room at home, placing the furniture against the walls, with high spirits. There was nothing to rehearse: the word rehearsal was erased from our vocabulary and from our practice, as were the words director, text, set, costume, lighting; their meaning connected to the form of theatre making from which we had fled like those escaping the plague.

We did not rehearse, we worked. María was a coordinator, not a director; the texts were scripts that we ourselves created; the space was circular; we did not need spotlights to illuminate us or special clothes to wear. In order to be close to people, we wanted to make our theatre in every possible place and at the times that were appropriate. Thus the group Libre Teatro Libre was born. It had a brief and radiant life of about seven years that left its mark on what was then called Latin American popular theatre.

Of course later on we began to use costumes - which we simply called clothes; and to write more structured texts based on precise issues that emerged from the social arena - documentary theatre. And we continued to apply the irony which strongly marked the majority of our productions from the start.

At the beginning of our story, María was about forty years old and I was twenty-four. She was a very exposed and belligerent woman and I was a somewhat protected young girl. From the start we shared a common love of words, and play on words, an affinity that provided us with much pleasure and amusement.

Nevertheless, with the passing of the



María Escudero and Graciela Ferrari, 1999.

years, on the one hand a certain reticence with which she protected the mysterious source of her knowledge and, on the other, the hardship of history that had exiled us from our country with no possibility of return, resulted in weakening the group's functioning so deeply that it broke into pieces. It disintegrated into as many fragments as were its components, in a hotel in the town of Barquisimeto, Venezuela, a million light-years away from our Cordoba in Argentina.

Many years passed, during which I met María only a very few times, at a festival or theatre meeting, in some foreign town. She lived in Quito; I travelled the world. And then came the moment when we were able to go back to Cordoba and live there again; but María did not return. Each one of us - the former members of Libre Teatro Libre - pursued his or her own theatre story, some in Cordoba, others definitely rooted in other places. María chose another Latin American country and, from what we heard from time

to time, devoted her efforts to both theatre and work with the most deprived women in Ecuador.

Time went on and, like her, I dedicated myself to having theatre pupils, creating performances with the student-actors, as she did, following the natural course of things. I learned other wisdoms and met other masters on the way; I became a theatre director, something she had never wanted to be. I loved the costumes, lights and props that were, and still are, the inevitable threads to use when weaving a dramaturgy - another word I got to know much later together with its meaning. I often wondered what María would say if she saw my work; on what aspect her sharp irony or the absolute truth of an essential comment delivered in a casual manner would fall like lightning.

Five years ago, in 1999, the three ex-members of the group living in Cordoba, with other friends, decided to celebrate the

thirtieth anniversary of the birth of Libre Teatro Libre and to pay homage to María. We all gathered together: those living in Italy, Switzerland, Spain, Ecuador, each with their own group and performances. It was a wonderful festival, attended by the town's whole theatre community, with overflowing audiences and the support of the same university that had fired María thirty years earlier. Speeches were given in which they publicly apologised to her; she was awarded an Honorary Doctorate from the University and was declared an honoured citizen of her birth town.

I lived in a state of exhilaration for those ten days. I remember I took care of María as if she were a child. I also recall that some years before the festival I had already begun to clarify for myself the significance of our shared time, of our common history made up of meetings and misunderstandings, of intensity and leaps into the void, of companionship and solitude, of unexpressed admiration for her genius, generosity and passion for theatre that, in reality, constituted a personal singularity that defined every act of her life. I decided not to forget the bad times, the difficulties and lack of understanding during the final years of the group's existence; but similarly it was impossible for me to ignore the fact that without María my life would definitively have been different. I actually don't know whether I decided, or whether the reticent maturity acquired from fifty years of living decided for me. What I do know, however, is that her presence, her singularity, and the influence that these had on me, changed me for ever. I know that in my devotion to her there are no shadows; the only ones that perhaps persist are those due to the whirlwinds of our country's history that blew on us all

equally.

María continues to live in Quito, sheltered by the generosity of friends with whom she has shared years of love and struggle. Her health is precarious, as is her memory. A short time ago, she was awarded the Manuela Espejo Prize for her work in support of women. On receiving it, she delivered an astonishing and moving speech. From some limpid and burning place in her mind, her lucid, fighting words emerged, drawn from her whole self. She - my master - is now seventy-six years old and I am fifty-nine.* The age difference is not the same as it was thirty-five years ago. It is much less, much more; it is nothing. The truth is that there is a space in time where I continue to be a happy bedazzled girl, ready to drink in every word she utters as if she were saying those words for me, only for me.

Translated from Spanish by Maria Ficara

GRACIELA FERRARI (Argentina) has worked in independent theatre as an actress, director and author since 1969. She has also worked as a producer and promoter of theatre events and as a teacher and researcher. She founded and has been a member of many groups in Argentina, Venezuela and Italy, with whom she has toured widely and participated in festivals and theatre meetings around the world. She was a member of Libre Teatro Libre, a group that represented an emblematic experience of Latin American theatre at the beginning of the 1970s. At the moment she lives in Cordoba, where she directs Teatro Avevals.

* Editors' note: María Escudero died in April 2005, after a period of illness, just as *The Open Page* n.10 was going to print.



International Women's Day, 8th March 2004, Quito, Ecuador Speech on Receiving the Manuela Espejo Prize

Dear Friends,

The day has finally arrived, and I am trying to write what I hope will be the words that will express to you or, rather, with which I will attempt to take on the responsibility that receiving this prize requires. As you can see and hear, I am surprised by the situation, and am calmly and simply trying to hide my understanding of the motives behind being awarded this prize that you are giving me, and that I receive from you here today.

What have I done to deserve the Prize which carries the name of Manuela Espejo, a woman, a fighter, a journalist, a writer, lucid defender of freedom? If the story of my life has been about making footprints, awakening memories and signalling the passionate path towards what each human being does and then usually forgets... should I talk to you about why I have done what I have done?

Perhaps a little, yes... What comes to my mind is that I began opening doors despite being told not to "because people don't deserve better". I always believed that people did deserve better, because they lived in silence and within the banalities set by others. This made me angry; because I knew that people did think, that they wanted to do things, but didn't dare to; I began to reject imposed and compliant silences. That is how I began to connect with people: artists, young people, boys and girls, women,

people who wanted to create, fight, love, and to undertake the work collectively, with respect for the knowledge of each person.

Why? Who am I? A primary school teacher who began the journey early, and a primary school teacher refusing to go along with those who couldn't finish telling their truth, hiding it in the classroom, in the courtyard, in silence, out of the fear of knowledge that causes anxiety and removes dreams.

I should tell you that I have no higher degree, that I am only a primary school teacher who got angry with her colleagues and decided to show them up in the classroom, in front of the students and, in this way, to open their hearts and eyes to the search for unexpected truths.

I should tell you that I am the daughter of anger and of the latent scream against silences and secrets, extremely well read in literature and historical facts, proficient with numbers, and, above all, effective with the many abilities I have learned in life. That is all I am. And that is the person who is being awarded a prize.

Thanks to circus, theatre seduced me from an early age. It has made me commit to myself and engage myself in relation to my own silences. Theatre is my life from the moment I wake up, until the moment I wake up again. I will continue to believe in it, in its beauty, its passion, its



madness, and in the battles already fought or yet to fight which involve art in our continent - art in freedom.

One day, perhaps taking a particular book from my father's library, I began to live with dreams and wings, with fear and anxiety, with uncertainty and happiness, because that is reading for me: to find myself at the beginning of the day, enjoying my bed, touching the leaves of the trees or lying on a lawn listening to their messages. The messages come one after the other, some dressed in beautiful colours, others like a bitter wind - just like me; the same person, who has changed a lot and has remained consistent and ready for a new adventure. Another journey? Yes, possibly.

Hopefully it is not the last journey, because I have yet to discover the fabulous and mysterious magnet of the invisible snows. Above all, I would like to last a little longer, see myself again, almost as I am now. Talking, thinking, struggling, arguing with those around me, loving them and being part of my existence until the end.

An adventurer - that is what I have been. I have never been crushed by fear or pride. I believe that almost nothing intimidated me. And yet, today I feel fear, a legitimate, real, almost terrible fear. Yet I am not afraid. Because, in life and with it, I think I have done my duty with existence.

I was, I am, I will be the circum-

stance I happen to encounter... and, dear friends, sisters and brothers, I feel that the last step is yet to be taken. And... to be honest, I still haven't bought my last pair of shoes. There is a María for a while yet! And above all: there are many Marías for a while yet!

Translated from Spanish by Siân Thomas

MARÍA ESCUDERO (Argentina/ Ecuador) started working in theatre with independent companies directed by Onofre Lovero and Juan Carlos Gené, before moving to Paris to study with Marcel Marceau and Ariane Mnouchkine. She returned to Argentina in 1962 and in 1969 she founded Libre Teatro Libre, initiating the working method of collective creation. Since 1977, María has lived in Ecuador where she has created performances with the groups El Tinglado, Saltamontes, Malayerba, La Trinchera and La Caja Ronca. In 1999 she received a Honorary Degree at Cordoba University, and in 2004 the Manuela Espejo Prize in Quito for her work in support of women. María Escudero died in April 2005.