

# Julia Varley

## Seven Blank Notebooks

For my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday I received seven blank notebooks from friends and pupils. The covers and the paper of each one of them is special, an indication that they should be filled with equally as important words or drawings. As Jill gave me hers, she suggested: "Write your love story!" It sounded like an order. After ten years of work at Odin Teatret, I wrote a book, and after twenty-five I am now finishing another. In the first, I kept on repeating that I knew nothing, while I enjoyed narrating facts. The book was never published. In the second, I am trying to give technical advice based on my experience in theatre, and I am suffering in the attempt to find the right words to put on paper. *Scripta manent*, written words remain, someone endlessly repeats as a warning in my ear. I am impatient to finish in order to move on to new questions and terminology, I need to get it out of my system. I am longing to be in the condition of a *tabula rasa* again, when a milestone is not something to build, but something which has been left behind.

Has something happened in my life for which I can say that nothing will ever be the same after that experience? Or should the question be that *I* will never be the same after that experience? During a journey to Thailand in 1987 I met an old woman who read my fortune from my hand. She told me that I would give up everything for an older man. I was with a friend, ill with cancer, who wanted to know if he would have children. Outside I saw a rat: it ran over the water which surrounded the wooden house, the river that was used for washing and to throw the rubbish in. It was not long since my divorce and I thought the Thai woman meant that one day I would leave theatre to make a family with another man. I looked at the lines on the palm of my hand: the lines of love, work and life appeared to be so clearly distinguished, even if in reality everything is connected. I did not know it then, but my work with theatre was about to give me my own wings. All my energy was concentrated in that direction. I did not worry too much about what the woman said. Only some years later would I understand that she meant I would give up

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having a family to follow an older man.

The first things I moved when I last changed house were my plants. My mother had come to help. It was during the last week of the summer holidays and luckily the sun was shining even in Denmark. We stuffed the theatre's van and my car with rhododendrons, roses, hydrangeas, wild apple trees and other bushes, and drove along the Struer fjord from one old farm house to another house on a hill.

Digging, planting, laying out manure, moving earth, mixing in sand, taking care knowing it was the wrong season to be taking plants away from their ground, we got so exhausted that now and then we had to lie on the lawn and giggle.

When we finished with the plants, we decided to move a cupboard I didn't like out of the bathroom. It was very heavy so, on my mother's suggestion, we used the car jack. Again, when the cupboard was leaning on its side, and we could not move in any direction, we laughed and laughed until we cried. We only managed to remain serious when we started to wash the whole kitchen with vinegar. It was a nice week.

In the fifty years of my life I have lived in six houses and three countries: not much, really. I have owned three cars, and only tortoises and hamsters as pets when I was a child. I have been officially married once, and I can count the men of my life on the fingers of one hand. I have no children, but some very close pupils. I was religious only for a few days when I was three years old, but I recollect clearly the different phases of my political engagement. I have forgotten when I wrote the first article, but I can remember when, during a meeting of the Magdalena Project's International Advisory Group, we decided to start editing a journal we called *The Open Page*.

The "first times" remain as marks

along the way: my first journey out of Europe to Peru, my first - and only, for now - total anaesthetic, my first period, the first time I voted (it was in Denmark), my first lecture at a university (it was in Italy), my first rehearsal, the first time I made a fool of myself with Odin Teatret...

Other memories remain as indications of special transitions: how the Magdalena grandmothers started drinking champagne at the Roots in Transit Festival, how I stopped skiing because my ski-boots hurt, how I missed school for half a year to sell potato chips and work in a printer's shop, how I got my first driving licence in Italy and then in Denmark, how after seeing the film *The Killing Fields* I decided I would never complain again about silly things like the weather, how I decided at thirty that suffering without cause is a waste of time.

Similar to when, as a child, changes were marked by the different schools I went to, since I make theatre the changes are marked by performances. They bring back memories of what happened in that period. With *Anabasis* I officially joined Odin Teatret; with *The Million* I learned to play the trombone; with *Ashes of Brecht* I first worked with a director; during *The Gospel According to Oxyrhyncus* I divorced; to prepare *Talabot* I travelled alone for the first time; *Kaosmos* created Doña Musica; *The Castle of Holstebro* was made when I had fallen in love again after a long time; *Mythos* was after a trip to Australia; *Andersen's Dream* after being in Egypt and Syria; *Doña Musica's Butterflies* was rehearsed in a hotel in Spain, in another in Italy and in the white room at Odin Teatret; making *The Dead Brother* I broke a lamp in Grotowski's theatre; the first costume for *The Echo of Silence* I bought in the pedestrian street in Copenhagen; *The Whispering Winds* reminds me of when I was able to clearly explain the difference between movement and action.

The same year I became fifty, Odin Teatret had its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary. We really wanted to use the occasion to do with our guests what we never have time to do: go for a walk by the sea, see the town, sit down and talk, dance. Most of all I wanted the people who know us on tour and support our artistic accomplishments to experience our relationship with the town of Holstebro, the side of our work which is more generally cultural.

I organised a special performance with all our guests as actors. I was the guide dressed as Mr. Peanut, my character with a skull head. We started at the theatre, it was raining and black rubbish bags were quickly turned into raincoats for those who needed them. The riding school exercised in the field just outside the entrance, as we got on to the two city buses and some motorbikes. Raquel Carrió from Cuba went in the sidecar of a motorbike. Mr. Peanut rode on the first motorbike driving the procession. At the train station a policeman met us all to take us to the police station where a very long rope had been laid out in the square in front of the police station. As we walked behind the policeman, the ballet school children danced for us in front of the post-office. A group of policemen in their best uniforms sang *Funiculì-funiculà*, presented a ballet with traffic direction movements to the circus music played by Odin's younger generation, and distributed a rose to each person and put the rope in their hands. Two policemen on motorbikes accompanied us for the rest of the parade. Mr. Peanut took off with the first part of the rope, and behind him one hundred and fifty people followed in a single line, with the rope in one hand and the rose in the other. As we crossed the first road and started walking down Holstebro's pedestrian street, I realised how heavy it was going to be to pull so many people. I could not regulate the tempo at all! On the way a girl sang from a

balcony, a group of students from the music school played clarinets standing in the fountain and ten children walking on stilts passed us in the opposite direction. The rappers who were supposed to play and dance must have been frightened by the rain.

We arrived at the old town hall square where the statue "The Girl on the Cart" by Giacometti is. This statue came to Holstebro the same year Odin Teatret did, so it is a tradition to pay homage to her whenever we organise special events in the town. The military brass band was playing a march as we arrived, and continued to play as, one by one, each guest deposited their rose in the frame we had built around the statue. In a serpentine formation we placed ourselves behind the statue and, when everyone had arrived, the firemen blew their siren, threw ropes out of the top window of the building in front of the square and climbed down. Other firemen from the roof behind pulled out their water pumps and pipes and started watering the roses, the statue and the guests.

Still holding on to the rope, we left quickly to go to the new town hall where Odin Teatret (Iben Nagel Rasmussen with her Trickster mask, brought in by Eugenio Barba in his Sonning Prize smoking suit) was going to get married to Holstebro (the Mayor). We left the rope at the entrance and all the guests sat around in the council room, while the Mayor made his speech. Then Mr. Peanut came in with a three tier wedding cake and offered it to everyone to eat with their hands. The day continued with a lunch at the museum, a concert by Ferghana Qasimova from Azerbaijan in the church, tea served by the different communities of immigrants at the local culture house, and a Peking Opera *King Lear* at the Music Theatre in the evening.

It was a good day and I wish I could have seen the long snake of our friends



Mr. Peanut, Holstebro Police and Fire Brigade, and guests, at Odin Teatret's 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary, 2004.  
Photo: Tony D'Urso



walking down the pedestrian street. But the experience that moved me most during the anniversary festivities was shaking hands as Mr. Peanut with all the children of Holstebro. We had invited Udi Grudi, a Brazilian theatre group directed by Leo Sykes, with a children's performance which they played every day twice a day for two weeks and to which all the local primary schools were invited for free. To reach the performance space, the children had to go along a labyrinth through the theatre, where some of Odin Teatret's and Teatret Om's characters welcomed them. Mr. Peanut was among them. It was incredible to see how every child had a different reaction in taking, squeezing or refusing my outstretched hand.

Mr. Peanut is often with me on important occasions. He was with me when I was arrested in front of the Moneda Palace in Santiago de Chile, when we played the *Theatrum Mundi* performance for the first time after Sanjukta Panigrahi had died, and when I worked on my first solo performance after a trip to Mexico.

The hotel overlooked the sea on both sides of the hill. On one side I could see a little port. Small fishing boats left before dawn heading out into the ocean. On the small beach in front of the houses and on the pier, the women of the village waited for the boats to return, ready to sell the fish. I sat on the terrace, looking out at the sea as the sky changed from night to day, and from black to light pastel colours, until the sun rose from the water on the yellow horizon. The evening before, from the beach on the other side of the hill, I had seen the sun setting into the sea. The sky was painted red with the spray of salt water breaking on the rocks. The air was soft, perfumed with happiness. I could not sleep because of jet-lag and I had an upset stomach with fever, but as soon as the sun had appeared G.

said: "Off we go!" And we drove 600 kilometres up the coast.

When we reached a place called Hidden Paradise we found the only lodging place where we could spend the night in a room with no windows, a wooden bed, cockroaches and a hole in the floor as toilet. For supper, we ate German sausages and black bread that we had kept from the aeroplane trip. The next day we started our journey again in the rented Beetle VW car we called Carlochi, in whose front boot our two leather bags fitted comfortably together side by side. We started driving inland after seeing the famous bay of Acapulco. We climbed up a changing landscape of cactus, mountains, desert, under a clear blue sky. Dressed in summer clothes, we ate melon, small sweet bananas and biscuits. We held hands and told each other stories of past lives.

It was getting late, but we wanted to see the church buried in the ashes after the eruption of the volcano not so long before. At a crossroads where a dirt track took off from the asphalt road, there were no signs, but we asked a group of people standing and waiting the way. There always seem to be people waiting at the side of the road with bundles and children. I wondered how they knew that a bus would come, and when.

A smiling, small, thin Mexican man quickly told us he was going to the same village, so if we gave him a lift he would show us the way. He jumped in and never stopped talking. I can't remember what he said. I had to concentrate on the road that must have been flattened by a tracked vehicle, leaving a close succession of bumps which made my breasts jiggle, my teeth chatter and my spine clump together as I had to keep both hands on the wheel. I needed to avoid the big holes in the road which appeared here and there and the flying stones lifted by the few cars coming in the opposite direction. I had to drive slowly

and then faster to avoid the cloud of dust lifted by lorries in front. It was a very long road but having a destination to reach we did not notice.

The man took us to his house. "You must come and meet my family," he said. And then he appeared with three saddled horses. "On you get!" he ordered. "It is late and this is the only way to get to the church, otherwise you will have to wait until tomorrow. We must go before it gets dark; quickly!" I love riding. I knew G. had ridden once before visiting a friend's coffee plantation in Colombia. I teased him as we mounted and rode into the forest following our newly made friend. It was slowly dawning on us that he was actually a tourist guide who had been waiting for new clients at the crossroads in order to earn his daily bread, but we didn't mind. We considered ourselves lucky to have found him when we needed a guide.

The steeple of the church rose out of the black solidified lava at the edge of the trees in the woods. The rest of the church was buried. Our guide left us alone and we remained very silent in this magic place. Without having planned it, we knew we were standing on top of the church in which we were getting married. After some minutes we smiled, walked around a bit, and then rode back to Carlochi who was waiting for us in the village. The bumpy track on the way back to the asphalt road in the dark seemed much longer. We longed for a drink of water, a bath and a bed with clean sheets. Eventually we found them. We were exhausted. In the next few days, after having reached the sea again, we feasted with sunshine, Mexican beer, lobster and rib-eye beef until the day I slipped in the shower, cracked my head and was taken to hospital for stitches. Lying on the bed waiting for the X-ray G. looked at me in a special way. He coined his main

nickname for me then and we knew something lasting had started.

On a woman's palm the love line should be stronger than the others. Family, friends and partners certainly play a fundamental role in my life. I could call them my milestones, as my choices evolve around them. But working with theatre, I see the lines of love, life and work joining in a spider's web that I am not able to unravel. The stories above could be real or the description of what I have imagined during an improvisation. Memories, feelings, sensations, fantasies and needs mix in my body and mind to generate scenic actions, and nobody needs to know if what inspires me is true, a wish or an invention. And then my actions - the performances - meet my friends, my family and allow me to fall in love. The really important life experiences remain veiled, while history is made by counting shows, houses, journeys and articles. The process is continuous and flowing: even the biggest changes don't look like solid turning points, but like the rapids and waterfalls of a winding river. My milestone is a stone of water that is ending one process and starting another. Was this the last chapter of my book, or the first chapter of the love story I have to write?

JULIA VARLEY (Britain/Denmark) has been an actor and pedagogue at Odin Teatret since 1976. She has published various articles and *Wind in the West*, a novel by a theatre character. She has been an active member of the Magdalena Project since its beginning. In 1999 she directed *Seeds of Memory* with Ana Woolf (Argentina) and in 2003 *Fox Wedding* with Hisako Miura (Japan/Denmark). Julia is on the editorial board of *The Open Page* and artistic director of Transit Festival.