

Malin Bratlie

The Parade

I was to give a workshop in the same school that I attended from when I was seven to fifteen. All the old teachers were still there, just older and more wrinkled. I felt sweaty and shaky upon entering the teacher's room and announcing that it was my turn to be the teacher.

On Monday morning, at nine o'clock, we all had to assemble at the football stadium in costume. When I arrived, there were hardly any children. I imagined that we would have to make a parade of only twenty people. However, to organise and transport several hundred children and teachers takes time. More and more of them arrived and fifteen minutes before the start the place was packed with children in costume: "Can you all line up? Are you ready?"

I was supposed to walk at the front of the parade beside a student from the Circus Pilots from Sweden and with a six year old girl standing on my shoulders as a kind of mascot. The drums began to play and we started to walk. We had not moved more than ten or fifteen metres before I turned to see how many we were: 560 children and teachers! My eyes filled with tears, but I thought that I had to hold them back just a little longer. Now it was happening. I turned again: 560 children! I couldn't believe it. We walked, tumbled and played our way through the main street of Porsgrunn (a town in Norway), with parents, teachers and other people watching from the pavements. One of the spectators came running up and said: "Save some energy for the next hundred metres. It is packed with people further up the street." I felt my pulse beating harder and harder, I was sure you could see it throbbing in my neck. It was thrilling!

When we arrived at the Town Hall Square we had to organise the children into a circle. My own group, Circus in Extencio, were going to do a pyro show as the finale of the parade. We had voluntary helpers from Porsgrunn International Theatre Festival and others ready at the square to assist us in placing all the children. We were also supposed to award a prize for the best act in the parade, and after a little break for some food, we were to go to the circus tent in the park nearby and watch two schools present their circus performances.

When we had finished in the Town Hall Square I started to cry. I cried and cried without really understanding why. I was just so incredibly relieved and proud! 560 chil-

dren in the parade and twelve of my oldest pupils who had led it in costumes they had made themselves! It had all gone so well, unexpectedly well. Our legs ached and we were sweaty and tired when we finally sat down at the back of the Town Hall. We were very happy.

This summer I also helped my mother move house. My mother is fifty-seven years old and she has 57,000 things. She had to move into sheltered accommodation, which is to say from her big apartment to a small one. Everything had to be looked at, wrapped and packed, and a lot had to be thrown away. Old memories were stowed away in black plastic garbage bags and thrown out. Mother is, like many women, a collector. She does not throw anything away: "It might come in handy one day!" Twenty years of needlework magazines, a box with twenty brand new umbrellas, wool bundles, cloth, mess, mess, mess: I threw things away and my mother put them back! My patience is not strong in these situations.

I often get mad with my mum. Mad about everything! Because she is sick and isn't able to go to the toilet or take a shower by herself. Angry because she asks me to help her and wishes I was there more often. I don't want to be her nurse, but her daughter. The feeling of being mother to my own mum is the most difficult I know. Especially when, like most mothers, I feel that I am doing an incredibly lousy job. And then I get a bad conscience! I don't like it: having a bad conscience makes me feel worthless.

Mum has always been very ill, and has had more than enough to do looking after herself. She is manic-depressive and a year ago she was also diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. Why did that have to happen in the middle of the worst chaos, circus projects and festival planning? What should I do? Before this, I had barely enough

strength to tackle the every-day tasks... I am not always able to deal with situations that mean I have to ask others for help and then I needed to do so. The thought that I do not want to be a burden for others keeps sneaking into my head even now. But I just could not manage to move my mum and at the same time travel round to the schools making circus projects for children!

From January until June 2004 I worked as the director of a circus project for children between the ages of six and thirteen; it was a collaboration between the Municipality of Porsgrunn and Grenland Friteater. I travelled round to the different schools giving workshops in stilt-walking, juggling, acrobatics, stage fighting and games. We played a lot, climbing on each other, falling down, climbing up again! Nobody was allowed to say: "I cannot do it" or "I am too heavy". In these workshops everybody can. The aim of the project was that all the schools involved should have the opportunity to make a circus performance and perform it in a circus tent during the Porsgrunn International Theatre Festival.

One of the most fantastic things about children is that they don't get caught up in problems the way that we adults do! Not that I always feel like an adult - very rarely in fact, but nevertheless! Maybe that is why I am so fond of children. They only expect you to be yourself. And conflicts are resolved with a quarrel and that's it.

I love working with children. It feels a privilege to travel round to schools and "play" with children every day! I teach them what I know, and often I end up learning more from their creativity and curiosity.

On the other hand the teachers were not so positive when the "circus" pounded into their room. They seemed to get nervous when they saw us coming. But deep inside we were the ones who were

nervous. Back at school again! I never liked going to school, I never enjoyed it, and now, of my own free will, I had to go back there, although in a different situation.

I was to give a workshop in the same school that I attended from when I was seven to fifteen. All the old teachers were still there, just older and more wrinkled. I felt sweaty and shaky upon entering the teachers' room and announcing that it was my turn to be the teacher. I did not feel less nervous when I noticed the teachers frowning at us when we came in, or looking startled when we shook hands with them. I also found this funny: so they felt ill at ease too. Whenever I get the feeling that someone thinks I cannot do something, a little devil in me says: "Just wait, I'll show you."

Usually one or two teachers met us at the door. I had an assistant with me, a pupil from the circus group that I have worked with since 2001 as a trainer/director for a group of young people between the ages of thirteen and twenty-five.

We carried our equipment to the school workshops in a dirty, old, grey, Norwegian knapsack. Usually we both had woollen hats on, indoors as well as out, and our training clothes were old gym trousers or shorts. If it was a warm day I would be wearing only a top and showing off my tattoos! We were a bit too freakily dressed to get instant credibility as teachers.

I have been an apprentice at Grenland Friteater, involved in projects there since 1999. The theatre is my family and workplace. It is where I go when I need help and advice. It makes me feel safe to know that such a place exists with such good people. It is also good to know that twenty years ago they were in the same situation as I am now.

Now Geddy Aniksdal's and Lars

Vik's children are my pupils in the circus group. It is strange. When I was a child and I watched Grenland Friteater on television, I little knew that I would work with them when I was older.

The first five minutes in the workshop is often chaotic. We unpack our gear, and all the children ask questions as they tear our stuff out of the knapsacks. They ask and ask and it is no use to say, "wait a minute".

To collect and quieten them, we sit in a circle. There is often a big fight to sit on our laps, but it can also be that the children keep away from us at a distance of three metres, being too shy to sit beside us.

"Hello! My name is Malin. I am twenty-six years old and work as an actor and teacher with a little circus group for young people." All the children keep silent. "Before we start I would like to know your names and how old you are. And then I wonder if you know what new circus is." The silence remains unbroken. No one says a word. "You can say whatever you like, don't be afraid of saying something wrong." Someone raises an arm carefully and guesses that it is a completely new kind of circus, or that it is for people who have just started making circus. They start to laugh at each other and after a bit of chatting neither the children nor I are nervous any longer.

"In my workshop I have many rules, but there is only one that you have to follow no matter what. When I whistle you must be dead still and silent. The rest of the time you can make as much noise as you want." Now it is the teachers' turn to become nervous. Now I can see the pulse in the side of their necks. Just the thought of letting thirty children make as much noise as they want is sheer madness! But then I am a bit mad, I have to be to work like this!

Thirty children making as much noise as they like? No problem. We do our



Malin Bratlie in *Fortune's Fool*. Photo: Per Kiran

warm ups and the children scream and shout while they run around, but when I whistle they stand completely still while I tell them about the next exercise. Stars in the book! The teacher sees that it works and starts breathing more calmly.

We usually start the practical part of the workshop with the children climbing on top of each other. I am shocked to see how many children, even as young as seven, have low self-esteem, believing that they are too fat, or too weak to climb on someone else or

have someone climb on them. Often when doing this exercise the teachers or the pupils themselves tell us that he or she is too fat or too weak.

It has happened that a teacher gets up in the middle of the instructions and pulls children away thinking they cannot manage: "We have some problems with this one, he often spoils the game" or "She is too fat to stand on someone else's back". Hearing this makes me angry. Adults don't change, I think.



Children's parade at Porsgrunn International Theatre Festival. Photo: Bård Sperrud

When I was little I often played drums on jewellery boxes and suitcases. That they broke and fell apart bothered me less than it did my mother. Couldn't we just mend them with tape? Or buy new ones? It was so simple, and anyway the suitcases gave such a good sound. Since I did not have real drums, couldn't I just as well use suitcases?

I was eight years old and this was my logic! Consequently most of the messages I wrote to mum in my diary started: "Why do you get cross?" or: "You are so stupid and daft, I do not like you any longer and everything is unfair." I also used to finish with the big threat: "I will move to grandma's!"

My mum and I wrote a diary together. I wrote what I wanted to say each evening and placed the book on her bed, so

that she could read it once she was in bed and answer immediately. I wrote the things I did not dare tell her directly. But already on the next page I would write how fond I was of her and that she was very kind. Next morning I would play the drums again without remembering that I had been at all angry with her. And living where I lived was fine! I was a child quarrelling one moment and forgetting about it the next.

I am often in situations where I wish I could remember more how it was to be a child. Every day I learn from children's way of solving conflicts, but I find it hard to remember. My logic is no longer simple, it has become complicated. It is easy to make big problems out of nothing.

To make the exercises in the workshop safer and more accessible I let the children try them out on me first so that they will understand how to do them. For some reason that is all that is needed: a grown up saying that everyone can take part, in whatever way they like. Even though I am a metre taller and much stronger than the children they begin to feel it is safe to climb on each other after having climbed on me. It is scary to stand on another person. I am often scared myself, but I know there is a technique and after a little time the children understand this, even if they use their own "technique". Usually there is no lack of proposals for ways to make the exercises better than how I taught them: "You adults can't really climb trees, and we do a lot of climbing!" True enough, I have learned a lot from letting the children work by themselves and observing how they find the solution to a problem.

Sometimes I sleep very little. No matter how tired I am, I wake up as soon as my head meets the pillow and I have time to think. What if my project is not good enough? What if it does not work? I don't have much

experience really. What if no schools want to make performances? I will be there during the festival in an empty circus tent. It was also scary to imagine all the schools doing their performances without anyone coming to see them.

I woke up at nights dreaming about building human pyramids, or that all the pupils on stilts were going to fall, that I had not taught them enough! But the aim was not to transform the children into circus artists, but to give them an activity during the theatre festival. This was to be the 10th festival and I was responsible for all these children! Help!

The festival had a "Street of Fools" and we were to open it, with all the children from the workshops, with their teachers and my Circus in Extencio. It had all been publicised and now we had only to wait and see how many wanted to take part.

Nervous again! Imagine if no one comes. I had engaged pupils and teachers from the local music school to play drums in the parade. My circus group had been in a workshop with Deborah Hunt and Sally Rodwell and they had made wonderful costumes and masks for the parade, which they were supposed to lead. Everything was ready. But still the fear and nervousness were there.

I have to confess that many of my projects land on the target more by luck than judgement. Whilst running from one thing to the other, afraid of not having everything I need with me, I often find myself thinking: "What are you doing? There is no chance that this will go well and what will happen then?" Sometimes projects run well without me really knowing why. Often I feel I am working 24/7, but still feel as though I am standing still. Then things work out and I land safely.

Often I lie awake at night worrying about it all: performances, the work, mum,

the theatre. I have one goal and I have taken a decision. I want to work in the theatre. But the loneliness of this profession can be as large as its social network. I often miss a big family to run to in these situations. And now I have one.

When I was little, I saw Lars Vik and Trond Hannemyr on children's television. I thought they were very strange and very funny. Lars Vik was my first teacher. It was in his *Fomlesen on Holiday* that I made my debut and went on tour for the first time.

When I realised that I wanted to become a pupil at Grenland Friteater I was sure of one thing. I wanted to become an actor; I wanted to be on stage. Only that! Surely it was not so difficult?!? I wrote a letter to the theatre, shoved it under the door to their office and waited for an answer. I wrote some of my thoughts about theatre and why I wanted to become an actor. They contacted me and told me I could start helping with practical tasks and also take part in the morning training.

I did not show up. I was dead scared. I did not leave a message either; I just did not appear. Later I went back and was given another chance. I probably did everything possible for Grenland Friteater to lose faith in me. Why should they care? I had been used to coming and going as I pleased without anyone having a say. All of a sudden someone cared!

Before the festival in 1999 Lars came to me and said he might have a job for me as prop-master for his next *Fomlesen* performance and possibly a little acting role as well, but only if I proved that there was a reason for me to be the one to get that job.

I worked and worked, before, during and after the festival. I had only showed the theatre group that I was lazy, now it was time to prove the opposite; at least to try. I do a lot of stupid things in my life, but I also

know when I have done them and do my best to make things right again.

I got the job as prop-master, actor and set assistant; the last one was the biggest challenge. We were not so lucky with the choice of designer and I happened to be her assistant and had to help. She did not know how to handle the tools to finish the set. I was not her favourite person when I announced that I could do it! I knew a carpenter very well and I spent late evenings and early nights sawing and hammering the set, which resulted in a very tired actor who wasn't in full control on stage the next morning.

I was angry and felt alone. No one saw how hard I worked. I felt as if I was being punished for my previous laziness. But it was not a punishment; it was because I had not told the others what I was doing at night and how much time it was taking.

I was afraid of not doing the job well enough. It took a lot of time and hard work before I could rest assured that I had done a good job. The funniest thing is now finding myself saying the same things to my pupils as I was told then, like, for instance, "Don't interrupt with questions in the middle of rehearsing a scene, wait until afterwards."

I have many memories from these years: the best thing about having had a difficult time is that now I remember it being painful and difficult, but not why - a child's capacity for forgetting?

I have often thought I must be a clown; being thrown here and there, stumbling on the way from one place to another. But even a clown knows where home is. I had one goal then: to make theatre. Since then I have had many goals, often more than I can achieve. My most important one is to participate in the world of theatre, whether by giving workshops for children or young people, performing with Grenland Friteater, doing voluntary work at the theatre, or with

my own solo performance work.

It is no longer important only to perform or be an actor. I have reached one goal. I can live in a world where dreams and reality are mixed together, just as they have always been in my head. I attain my goal every day when I go to work, and then I can dream about transforming the small goals into big ones.

Translated from Norwegian by Geddy Aniksdal

MALIN BRATLIE (Norway) was born in 1978. She studied circus techniques and theatre sports, before becoming a pupil at Grenland Friteater from 1999 to 2001, and participating in some of their productions as an actor. Besides continuing to collaborate with Grenland Friteater, in 2002 Malin started working with Circus in Extencio, directing some of its productions and teaching circus courses for children and young people.