

María Luisa de Zela

Mapping the Way

FIRST SOURCES

When I was five years old, for some strange reason I didn't understand, I wanted to be an actress. I felt an urge that prompted me in that direction. That energy accompanied me like a natural instinct, and, despite the difficulties, it made me work hard against the tide, in order to approach theatre and begin to practise it.

Now - a long time later - I know that part of my work involves preserving that original instinct, to channel and transform it with the faith of the child within me and the tenacity and rigour of the artisan. The instinct told me that in order to move forward, I should learn, open my mind, fight against my fears and blocks, uncover my clichés, discover my inner strength and recognise my weaknesses.

After finishing my secondary studies, I immediately began to work with a puppet theatre group. This was my first apprenticeship. I discovered that intuition is like a sixth sense that requires humility and the combination of impetuosity with industry in order to develop and bear fruit.

A politically driven vision of culture has never existed in my country. There are very few possibilities for studying theatre and many limitations to practising it. Nevertheless, I decided to undertake professional studies to become an actress: I entered the Theatre School of the Catholic University of Peru, from where I graduated three years later. Then I worked as a teacher in the same school and later was appointed director, a post I held for eighteen years, from 1983 to 2000. I was twenty-five years old when I first took on this responsibility.

This was a very important phase of my theatre training, a time during which I came into contact with many generations of actors and experienced practitioners. It allowed me to discover personal principles and to support a contemporary vision for Peruvian theatre.

Four aspects of this experience were basic to my research. The first was to evaluate and acknowledge our

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culture and the richness of our theatre. This meant going beyond the official cultural statements that, in my country, generally marginalise both what is not western and the people's cultural expressions. The latter, from my point of view, on the contrary, possess great wisdom and are a resource for learning for any contemporary artist and most especially for theatre artists.

Next was the need to create a solid and committed working unit of theatre practitioners from different groups and projects. Together we researched new ways of teaching, open to challenge, dialogue, exchange, experimentation and different approaches to theatre training and performance. We created the possibility that contributions by Grotowski, and from theatre anthropology and other theatre cultures of the world could be incorporated into our work; something that had never happened before in the official theatre schools of Peru.

The third was to create a mystique and a philosophy of work based on discipline and the development of tools and abilities, in order to avoid being swept away by the alienating conditions produced by the institutionalised corruption in my country and by an equally corrupt market economy which - considering art and culture as simple merchandise to be bought and sold - transforms young actors into passive, dependent and uniform hostages.

The fourth was the creation of a generation of theatre practitioners with a new mentality, knowledgeable in their field, aware of the ongoing need to study and research beyond the end of schooling, capable of questioning the system, creators and not simple interpreters.

The experience of training actors, when thorough, open and creative, is also an opportunity to train and develop oneself. I would not have been able to build this road

by repeating safe patterns from an academic and rational perspective. It has been necessary for me to give space to intuition, natural impulse and risk.

Today, I can witness how the efforts of that period have produced results. Many young former students of the school have continued with their own theatre proposals; they have formed groups, laboratories and other projects with an innovative vision. The value of a school is not in the institution, but in the quality of the experiences, relationships and people. A good school does not pass on static formulas, it helps its students to go beyond the models and build their own deeply rooted paths.

URNS, PLOUGHS AND WINGS

In 1978, the first International Meeting of Theatre Groups was held in Ayacucho. This event had repercussions in Lima and thanks to it I got to know other European, Latin American and Peruvian groups in which I recognised common research elements.

My first training in the university school had been classical, connected to dramatic text and to a Stanislavskian perspective, with a few attempts to explore other directions. My most moving apprenticeship developed when I joined the theatre group Maguey at the invitation of its director, Wili Pinto Cárdenas. From then on a different phase began for me. I discovered another physical, intellectual and creative training that introduced me to a new scenic language and code, beyond the hierarchy of text.

My interaction with the director was challenged and greater demands were made on me as an actress who takes part in the creative process. I found a new relationship with the training, my body and my memory, as a source of learning and of creating actor's materials. Working with Maguey my personal



María Luisa de Zela in *Micaela*. Photo: Wili Pinto

school became a permanent research laboratory, with a discipline that goes beyond personal limitations.

Now, after a long period of constant struggle to destroy and rebuild myself, I am able to enjoy the paradoxes of my process and discover the value of instability, uncertainty and play. Each process is new: I have to start from scratch, become detached, learn to be neutral and empty. In a certain way, I have to maintain the naivety of a little girl and trust the accumulated experience always hidden behind this naivety. To follow a road in reality means to build a road. It has taken time for me to believe in this and I have had to die a little in order to be reborn.

Now I work in Maguey as an actress and teacher. I develop theatre projects, play and artistic integration with children and teenagers who are clever and questioning teachers for me. In our Laboratory-School, Lunanueva, I teach young people who are training professionally with us and I also train educators who use our methods to make theatre in primary schools and poor neighbourhoods.

Our choice as a group is to go

beyond the usual presentations of a theatre company and the traditional circuit of the audience, which is quite limited in Peru. We maintain contact with schools, universities and municipalities, allowing us to underline the importance of the social and cultural dimension that theatre has beyond performance. Our work has to take multiple and complex shapes, which demand radical commitment and fill us with endless learning resources and vital experiences. Our creative work receives feedback and is nourished by the surprising and ever changing bonds and relationships coming from our surroundings. I am an actress not only when I am on stage: the quality of my conscience and of my actions is always important.

BRIDGES AND TREES

In 1992 in Pontedera, Italy, I was lucky enough to meet Jerzy Grotowski and share a meeting with him that left a deep and lasting impression on me. This experience has fundamentally influenced my search for quality in my work as an actress, not only in rehearsal and performance, but also as a teacher, in my relationships, in my own stage presence and that of my group. We work in a violent environment that tends to obliterate the different and personal. Our work is indispensable and transcendent even if it remains on the margins and loosely connected, not because of fame or external success, but because it becomes a reserve, a space of personal, human and artistic resistance.

Oswaldo Dragún, late founder and director of the International School of Theatre of Latin America and the Caribbean, also created bridges and meetings. He used to say: "In our school stealing is allowed, so steal everything that can be useful to you." With a joke he emphasised the value of exchange in the process of learning and creativity. This school also provided an opportunity for my colleagues and I to grow. To meet different,

distant, even opposite experiences, being enriched by their otherness, reminds us that within ourselves there are also other dimensions waiting to be discovered; nothing is finished; our logical and rational dimension only contemplates a relatively small portion of personal experience.

In 1996 and 1998 we met and worked with Fumiyoshi Asae, master of the Kanze School of Noh Theatre. I recognised something essential to my work in his principles, and his artistic depth gave me new strength and inspiration. In the composition of our performances, and particularly the last one, *Azúl naranja, el espejo de la flor* (Blue Orange, the Mirror of the Flower), we work with principles related to the Noh experience, even though this is not explicit. Nevertheless, we feel that we are doing nothing else but continuing to deepen the directions that our intuitive research took in the beginning.

There are people and experiences we choose or find that are like bridges that help us to recognise and unite opposing banks; they are like trees that enrich us from the depth of their roots, their diversity of form, the simultaneity of their energy and direction.

SENSATIONS, ACTIONS AND ROADS

In a country where culture doesn't seem to matter, where human values are shamefully lost, our performances have always signified risk and the maturation of a difficult, painful process.

Gambling on culture and making a living from art, are difficult tasks in times of corruption, indifference, marginalisation, fear and unlimited power in the hands of few. In this context, the work of the actresses who dare oppose the imposition of the norm means much more than just playing an artistic role. It is a hopeful, life giving and creative response, a vigorously female answer

that mobilises Peruvian theatre and questions an indifferent macho society, inviting it to reclaim spaces for sensitivity.

In the face of this reality that seduces even the strongest, I reaffirm myself in my work and group. I have roots, dreams and the tools to build, to make mistakes and carry on; I reaffirm myself in the transcendent potential of theatre. Luckily, I always think that I am just beginning; I know and don't know; I understand and am confused; I need my intuition.

Technique is very important for the actor's work, but what is essential is not to be found only there. There is something that reaches beyond, digs deeper inside; there is something that we never stop looking for and that impels us to build the road.

Translated from Spanish by Silvia Bronwell Castillo

MARIA LUISA DE ZELA (Peru) is an actress and theatre pedagogue, a member of the Theatre Group Maguey and of the Laboratory-School Lunanueva since 1987. She studied at the School of Theatre of the Pontificia Universidad Católica of Peru and was its director from 1983 to 2000. As an actress she has worked in theatre, film, television and radio. Luisa has toured Peru, Ecuador, Venezuela, Colombia, Chile, Mexico, France, Italy, Denmark and Finland.